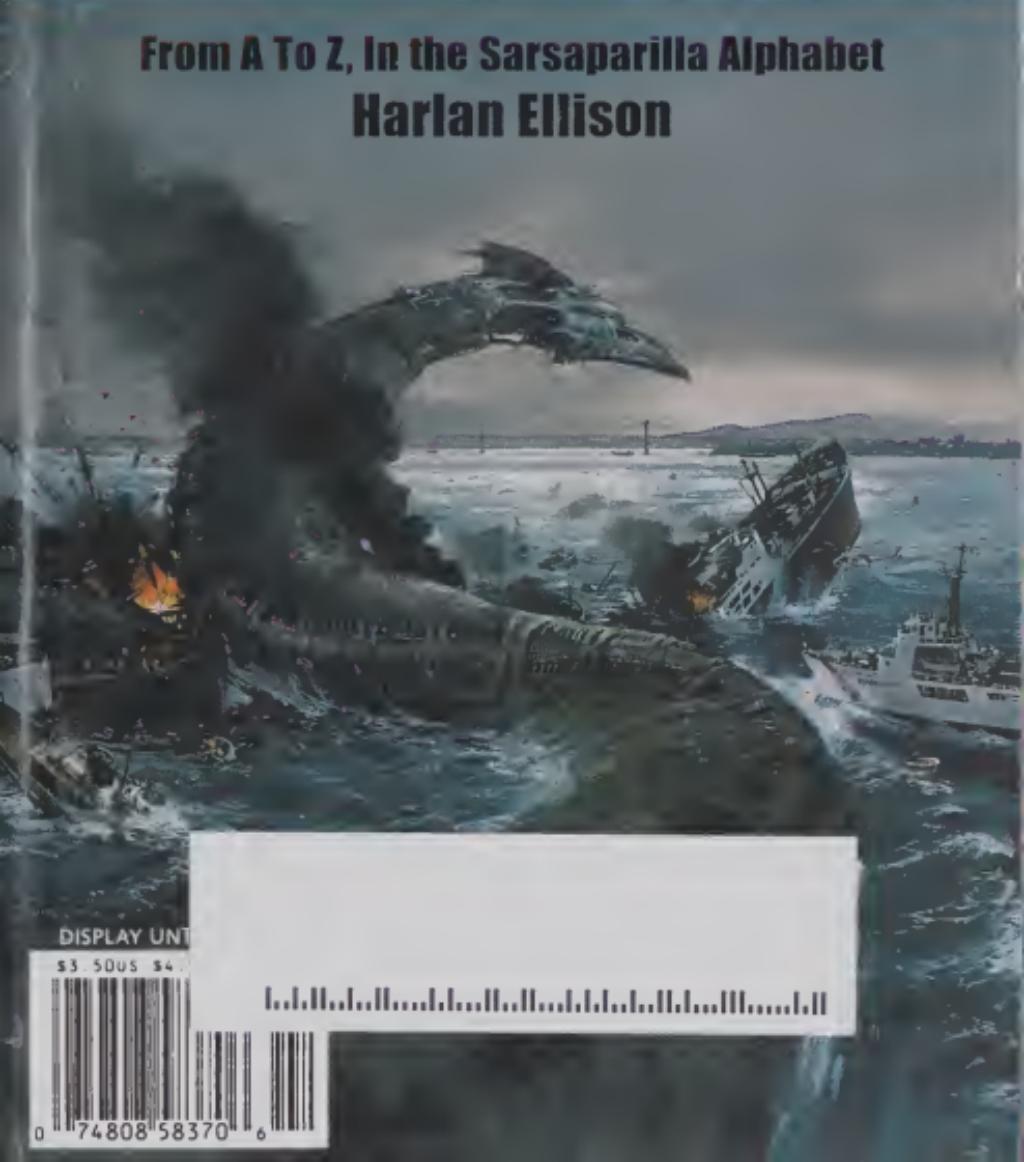


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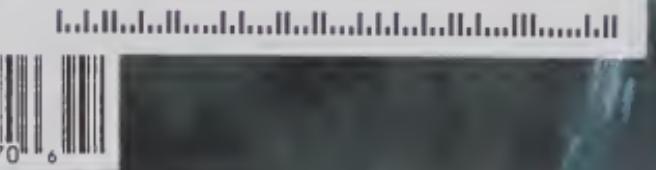
FEBRUARY

From A To Z, In the Sarsaparilla Alphabet
Harlan Ellison



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EDITORIAL

EDWARD L. FERMAN

This valediction by the long-time owner and publisher is being written in late October—World Series time—and I feel a bit like an owner coming into the dugout during the game; it's just not done. But the new publisher offered me space to say goodbye, and it occurs to me that I had something to do with today's game; I was editor back in 1991, when Harlan Ellison's feature novella was acquired.

There is one similarity between owning a baseball team and a science fiction magazine: both owe a lot to fans, and fans want to see their institution continue and improve. That is no easy goal in today's market for small magazines, but it was my first consideration in looking for a buyer.

I've been involved with *F&SF* for 38 of its 51 years, joining the magazine in 1962, when its cover

price was 40 cents and the editor was Avram Davidson. I soon was working with Avram on *F&SF*'s first special one-author issue (Theodore Sturgeon, September 1962), and it's significant that the tradition is being continued with next month's issue (see page 137).

It indicates that the new publisher shares a sense of the history of *F&SF*. And we know that he is dedicated to continuing its tradition of excellence.

How are we certain of this? Because he is someone you know very well: Gordon Van Gelder, who has been editor of *F&SF* since 1996. On a rainy Wednesday in October he arrived at the magazine's offices in West Cornwall, CT, where we closed the deal and he moved the files to the new headquarters, in a townhouse in Hoboken, NJ.

F&SF is in the best possible hands, and I wish him and all our readers good reading and good fortune in the coming years.



Our second abecedarian story from Mr. Ellison (after his "Chocolate Alphabet," Oct. 1976), like many of his finer tales, flew from his faithful Olympia typewriter whilst he worked in the front window of a bookstore. This time round, each section originated with a bookstore patron whose purchase allowed him or her a chance to "outsmart" the author with a mythological deity so obscure that Harlan would have to resort to an encyclopedia. Thus came Archons ("World-governing powers that were created with the material world by a subordinate Gnostic deity called the Demiurge.") The footnotes and introductory essay didn't arrive in time for our deadline, but look for them when this story appears in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his Deathbird Stories, due out shortly. You might want to keep a reference text handy as a safety net while you follow Harlan's astonishing high-wire act.

From A to Z, in the Sarsaparilla Alphabet

By Harlan Ellison



is for ARCHON

"One more goddam sanctimonious sound, and I swear by the Demiurge, I'll snuff out that mealy-mouthed spark," said #7, sipping cold coffee from a Styrofoam cup.

"Easy...easy..." #12 said, rewinding his penis. "You'd better be grateful this cell is lead-lined. The Old Man hears that kind of bitching, you'll be sweeping out the eyes of hurricanes for the next ten thousand years. Remember, kid, it's just a job. When you've gotten as old in the game as I, well, all the hosanna and selah and blessed-be-His-name rolls off your carapace like Sterno off a bindlestiff."

The Archon oozed off the wall of the detention cell, dissolved into a puddle of sludge in order to rid himself of an annoying itch in his upper eyeball sphincter, and reformed beside the little TV table bearing the last of the doughnuts. He studied the pastries remaining, and muttered,

"Glazed. I hate glazed. Serves us right for sending a goy to buy them. You say *raised*, they hear *glazed*. Feh."

The other jailer, the younger, #7, made a retching sound and sent an extrusion of holy greenish flesh across the stone floor of the cell, to tap #12 on his third leg. "Now who's complaining? This coffee was wretched when Hector was a pup."

But he drained off the last of it, set the Styrofoam cup on the metal bunk, and watched as it cornucopially refilled itself. With cold, bitter coffee.

"So, listen, 12, how did you get into this line of work?" He was young, perhaps only an eon and a half, and still naive. As if one "got" into this line of work. All but the freshest arrivals knew that in the realm of divine light beyond the universe through the divine emanation (usually referred to on the Celestial Ephemeris as RDLBUTDE, which was a strictly noxious acronym, unpronounceable even to the most linguistically accomplished seraph) pulling guard duty over the divine spark was shit detail reserved for Archons who had somehow royally cheesed off The Old Man.

#12 grimaced. Spending a century or two with this pimply-pricked kid would undoubtedly make him unfit for decent service anywhere in the universe when his tour was up. He thought once again, as he always did when he was a short-timer, of opting for rebirth. But when the time came, and he checked out the condition of the Real World, it was always dirtier and dumber than he'd left it, so he inevitably re-upped. Six hundred and eleven times, to date.

In the corner, glowing fitfully, the divine spark of the human soul reeled off the totality of public utterances once spoken by Billy Sunday and Aimee Semple McPherson, and began to make in-roads on the private ruminations of Oral Roberts.

#7 threw the Styrofoam cup at the divine spark. "Will you, in the name of all that's holy, shut the hell up for just *five* bloody minutes!?!?" The divine spark paid no attention, cranky as usual, and more than a trifle meanspirited, and footnoted its Swaggart sayings with minutiae from Anita Bryant, one of the latter day saints.

"Well, kid," #12 said, preening his pinfeathers, "I got *into* this line of work by creating okra."

"Say what?"

"Okra. You know, okra. It's green."

"I thought she was black. Well, dark-brown, actually."

"Not *Oprah*, kid! Okra. The vegetable."

"You pulled divine spark jailer duty for creating a vegetable?"

"It wasn't a reward. It was a punishment."

"For a vegetable?"

"Clearly, kid, you have never tasted okra. It was purely not one of my best ideas."

The kid, #7, sighed. "Oh, now I get it," he said. "This is The Old Man's way of kicking me in the ass. I thought I was pulling down cushy duty, something that'd look good on my resumé. Boy, talk about not knowing what's happening."

#12 was intrigued. What could this young Archon have done that could equal the nastiness of okra? He asked the kid.

"Beats me," #7 said. "I've only done a couple of things all told. How long, uh, does one figure to be on this detail?"

"Well," #12 said, "I've been watching this stupid spark for eight hundred thousand years, Real World time."

"For a vegetable?"

"I'm up for reassignment in about sixty-five years. I'm short. I can do it standing on my head."

"Holy...The Old Man must've been really honked at me. I saw my dossier. I'm on this duty till Hell freezes over, which I understand doesn't happen for another million and a half years."

"So what'd you do?"

"I created the mail order catalogue. Junk mail."

"You're in it, kid. For a long time. Well and truly."

In the corner, the divine spark droned on, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and on and on and on. After six months, #7 asked the elder Archon, "What are we supposed to do to pass the time?"

"Well, I'll tell you what I did for most of the time I've been here with this imbecile. And I'll be gone soon — which is, I suppose, why The Old Man brought you in — so you can practice with me, if you like."

"Yeah, sure. Of course. But...what is it?"

"Gin rummy. Three across, Hollywood style, tenth of a scintilla a point, five hundred per game for schneider."

In the corner, for the first time since the younger Archon had entered

the detention cell, the divine spark shut up, perked up, and began making warm, expectant sounds.

"The divine spark plays gin rummy?"

"For eons."

"Well, that's a little better, I guess."

"Not really," said #12.

"Why's that," #7 asked.

"The divine spark of the human soul cheats."

In the corner, the glowing ball chuckled nastily. As Archons went, there was one born every second.



is for BANSHEE

Just outside Belfast, the heavy metal ripper punk snake-oil rock band that called itself The Fluorescent Stigmatas had been booked into Castle Padveen as the opening night attraction. The ninth Earl of Padveen — Skipper to his friends — had been offered the options of selling the great stone structure for back taxes or developing some commercial use for the ancestral home, though it was known throughout the land as the most annoyingly haunted edifice in Ireland. Skipper had decided to turn Castle Padveen into a night club. And on opening night, as The Fluorescent Stigmatas launched into their second set, opening with *Don't Woof in Mah Haggis, Bitch*, the Fender bass player, Nigel, had a massive coronary, pitched over dead, sent the packed audience into paroxysms of anger at having the music stopped, and brought forth the redoubtable banshee of Castle Padveen, acknowledged the noisiest and most off-key wailer of all those ghastly haunts.

The banshee materialized just over the bandstand, her one great nostril blowing air like a bagpipe, her long red hair smoldering and sparking, her empty eyesockets on fire. And she began her dirge, her horrific caterwauling, her teeth-jarring threnody of fingernails down a blackboard...and The Fluorescent Stigmatas nodded, listened, vamped for a minute, then fell in behind her.

Their first album went platinum last week. With a bullet.



is for CHARON

Among the poster advertisements on the Staten Island Ferry is one that shows a terribly thin, extremely unhappy looking man in black cape and cowl, poling a garbage scow bearing the legend Phlegethon, around Manhattan Island. The poster reads: I GOT MY JOB THROUGH THE TIMES

The lonely figure has a copy of *The National Enquirer* sticking out of his back pocket.



is for DYBBUK

The *dibbuq*, in Jewish folklore, is a disembodied human spirit that, because of former sins, wanders restlessly until it finds safe haven in the body of a living person.

It is well-known that the French love the work of Jerry Lewis.

If you look long enough, and hard enough, there is an explanation for even the most arcane aberration.



is for ECHIDNA

Downunder, in Oz, there is a small, awfully cute monotreme known as the echidna. If you startle this Disneylike animal, it will roll into a spiny ball, belly-up, seemingly comatose.

If one looks up echidna in the *Britannica*, one learns that the name

comes from the Greek for snake: a creature half-woman, half-serpent. Her parents are variously alleged to have been the sea deities Phorcys and Ceto, or Chrysaor — the hideous son of Medusa — and Callirrhoë — the daughter of Oceanus. Further, one learns that among Echidna's children by the hundred-headed Typhoeus were the dragons of the Hesperides, the Hydra, the Chimaera, and the infernal hounds Orthus and Cerebus. Which makes Orthus's progeny, the Nemean Lion and the Sphinx, the Echidna's grandchildren.

The echidna lives faraway at the bottom of the world, mostly rolled up in a ball. Is it bothered? Certainly not.

But not one of those ungrateful kids calls, sends a card, even during the High Holy Days. But, hey, listen, like a Brillo pad, that's what's got to be a mother's heart. I'll just lie here belly-up in the dark.



is for FENRIS

The deep core rig went down five miles into the Ross Shelf. When the fiber optic snorkel cameras ringing the drill burned out, they withdrew. At the base of the core sample, in the block of ice eight feet across and fifteen feet deep, they found what had blinded the instruments.

Frozen in ice was a gigantic wolf.

When they swung the section overhead on the gigantic pneumatic crane, they understood what had scorched the optics: the beast, trailing a broken chain, was giving off heat and light. Its body glowed from within, and the ice melted, showering on the drilling crew and geologists. The block slipped its moorings, crashed to the ground, and shattered. The wolf shook itself massively, its evil green eyes surveying the terrified crew. Then it threw back its head, howled at the bright sky, and loped away to the north.

But if this is Ragnarök, and Fenris has swallowed the sun...

Whose eye continues to burn down upon us?



is for GOD

GOD is an acronym for Good Old Demon.
 This good old demon's name is Bernie.
 Bernie is your basic good old boy demon.
 Bernie owns Texas.
 They say there is no god in Texas.
 Boy, are they wrong.



is for HIPPOGRIFF

The metaphor. From Virgil. "To cross griffins with horses." Meaning: to attempt the impossible.

The metaphor. A small, unruly beast with paper breath and bones of conjecture. The metaphor, like the hippocriff, of mixed parentage. The date-rape of logic by surmise. When the metaphor takes wing, it is with a rush of sound such as one hears only when phantom locomotives play sackbut, lyre and symbol.

The hippocriff slides through the tawny waters, warfing and wobbling. Hear the song of the hippocriff: etymology in the key of skeleton.



is for ILITHYIA

It was in all the papers. In Minnesota, the midwife Ilithyia was brought up on charges for performing unlicensed abortions. The trial was a sensation. The jury was composed entirely of men. When they brought

in the verdict *guilty*, and the members of the Right to Life League stood up to cheer, Ilithyia said, "Ah, screw it," and smote them hip and thigh with bolts of chartreuse lightning.

This year, Minnesota goes Pro-Choice.



is for JACKALOPE

Texas, again. Land of myth and wonder. Home of a million private lives. The choking Doberman. The kitten in the microwave. The jackalope.

Yankees think the jackalope was the invention of a guy who wanted to sell big brag postcards — here's one of our oranges, it says, and it's a painting of a watermelon-sized Navel — the crossing of a jack rabbit with an antelope. Huge hind legs that permit the beast to go like a sonofabitch on fire! Huge ears flattened by the wind as it races eighty miles an hour across the Panhandle.

That's a lot the damned Yankees know.

Down here in Nacogdoches we know better. Just ask Joe Lansdale. Joe was stalked and damned near killed by a rabid jackalope maybe two, three years ago. Only saved himself at the last moment by using the one weapon that can kill a jackalope.

He stabbed it through the heart with a Stuckey pecan praline.



is for KELPIE

It was late, well past the hour in which they closed the pool. But Hester had gotten special dispensation from the building's management. Not only because she was an administrative assistant at Chicago Sky Tower, and thus entitled to a few minor privileges, but because she had spent the past three days, almost without break, reorganizing the data-

base: the condo owners on floors fifty through ninety-five, their dependants and hired help, anyone cleared for access to the dwelling storeys; the offices from twelve to fifty, all staff members down to the last wage-slave in the typing pool; the galleria shops and their sales force from ground level to twelve...the data fields went on and on.

It was little enough for them to key her in for a late night swim in the warm, silent Olympic-sized swimming pool.

Hester floated on her back, auburn hair trailing on the surface like a Portuguese man-of-war. She had turned on only the valance lights; their soft blue-white glow cast a calming, almost ethereal luminescence across the gently rippling water.

There was the sound of a door closing on metal jamb.

Hester swam quickly to the edge of the pool, and pressed herself against it. She was naked.

The man was tall, and dark. She could not tell whether he was Caucasian or Negro. His skin was almost the shade of teak, a golden hue that gave no indication of heritage. But it wasn't suntan, genuine or salon-produced.

He strode toward her, and looked down.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said. His voice was buttered toast. If she had ever trusted anyone in her life, she trusted him. His smile, his manner, the way his hands lay along the seams of his pants. Kind eyes and honest speaking.

"Well, the pool is actually closed," she said, not wanting to offend him, afraid of losing him even before he had had a chance to discover her. "I'm staff here at the Tower. They let me use it after hours sometimes."

"May I swim with you for a while?"

She dimpled prettily. There had been a husband, briefly, eleven years earlier. A passion or two since. Nothing more. "To be honest," she said, "I'm naked. I wasn't expecting anyone else. The doors were supposed to be locked and —"

How had he gained entrance? She wanted to ask him, but he was removing his clothes. "That should be all right," he said. "No problem. And nothing to feel awkward about."

He stood naked at the edge of the pool, almost aglow with his easy beauty. Then he seemed to lift from the tile edge, as if airborne; arched over her; and sliced into the pool as smoothly and cleanly as a paper cut.

She watched him stroke away from her, barely making a splash. He reached the deep end, tucked and rolled, and beat his way down to the shallow end. Then he came back. She watched, realizing she had been holding her breath.

And when he came to her, she laid her hand on his bicep and felt the blood beating beneath the skin. He reached for her, and took her hand and put it on his hip, and her hand slid between his legs, and she knew that there would be more than swimming.

He pressed against her, and her back went flat to the tiled side of the pool. She let her arms trail at her sides, and when he spread her legs and lifted them around his hips, her arms laid out in the overflow gutter, giving her the proper height. She felt him trying to penetrate, and she closed her eyes, her head thrown back; and then he was inside her.

And in that instant the kelpie changed shape. His sleek head of hair — which she now realized had been wet even before he had entered the water — seemed matted with weeds. She felt a terrible pain as he expanded within her, and the sound he made was that of an animal, a cross between a horse and a bull.

The kelpie went to its native form, holding her helpless. To be mounted, to be drowned, and her flesh to be eaten. The kelpie, servant of the Devil. Hester screamed...

And fought back. First she trapped his organ within her, held in a grip as tight as a walnut shell. Then she changed. Her body expanded, altered, flowed, and reformed.

Flesh was eaten. But not hers.

Love is a changeling. The kelpie: waterhorse. Hester: the sharkling. There are forms that are ancient, and there are natural predators. More recent.

The water was warm. And peculiarly tainted.



is for LEVIATHAN

In what would have been the year 6250 B.C. the crippled century-vessel from somewhere in the deeps of space fell through our galaxy, and

entered the atmosphere at such a steep angle that only one pod of the great ship survived, crashing into the sea and vanishing.

On April 14, 1912, the Titanic struck a berg off the Grand Banks and went to the bottom, carrying 1517 souls to their death.

The race that had come to an unwanted new home in the deeps watched the poor ship die, and felt pity. In their compassion they went to the creature and mated with it; and they lived in harmony for almost seventy-five years, and the progeny of that union swam through the oceans of the Earth undiscovered and unimpeded.

Then the ghouls violated the tomb. They came to the shell of the mother and they stole. They ravaged the corpse.

And the children rose, and went in search of the entrepreneurs who had gone through the pockets of the shroud for pennies. And in New York harbor, in the stretch of water known as the Narrows, the first born of that metallic union rose with its gleaming sinewy length, and began exacting vengeance of the parasites that had so dishonored the memory of its mother.

Now the seacoast of the world is forbidden territory.

You can see their eyes glowing offshore every night.



is for MUT

Osiris met her at the fresh fruit counter of the A & P in the Blue Nile Mall. She was squeezing pomegranates. He dallied, pretending to blight the figs, and finally was able to catch her eye. "Horus," she said, when he returned the eye. "Lovely," he replied, meaning the Eye of Horus and meaning *her*, as well, but basically too shy to say it without covering his verbal tracks. "And all-seeing, as well," she added, dimpling prettily. He smiled; she smiled; and he asked her name. "Isis Luanne Jane Marie," she said, "but my friends all call me Isis." He went pink and stammered, and finally managed to say, "May I call you Isis?" and she said yes, that would be lovely, and did he come here often? And he said, oh only to practice a little resurrection in the meat department, and she gifted him with a giggle and a pirouette, and he asked her where she was from, and she said, "Lower

Egypt, over that way," and she motioned toward the parking lot. But Osiris's heart turned to ash, as he noticed for the first time the cobra totem of Buto on Isis's perky baseball cap, worn slantwise in the homeboy style so popular at the moment. He was glad he hadn't worn his falcon's crest Borsalino, the dead giveaway that he was from Upper Egypt. It would have shamed her immediately — coming from the wrong side of the tracks as she did — actually the *lower* side of the tracks — and he didn't know what he was going to do. Because as surely as Aunt Taueret had made whoopee with a hippopotamus, he knew he had fallen in love with this Isis from Lower Egypt, and he knew that his mother was never going to approve of the relationship. He could hear her now: *You can't be serious, Osiris dear; why, she simply isn't Our Sort.*

But they began dating on the sly, catching a double-bill during the Haya Harareet Film Festival at the Luxor multiplex, flogging *fellahs* and feeding the pieces to Nubian lions, sneaking out for a smoke behind the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut, and in general carrying on the way young people in love have carried on since Ra was only a twinkle in the cosmic egg.

And finally, it became clear to Osiris that he had to come clean; that he could not stumble through eternity without Isis Luanne Jane Marie at his side. So he sat her down one evening in front of the baboon paintings at Tuna Gebel, where they had gone to eat because they'd heard that Gebel made the best tuna in pita anywhere in the Twin Kingdoms, and he told her he was from this wealthy family in Upper Egypt, and his mother was Mut, and if they were ever to be as one they would have to go and see his mother to get her blessing.

At first Isis was beside herself. She wept and tried to run off, but Osiris held her and soothed her and told her he loved her more than sliced papyrus, and finally she was able to sob a question. "What about your father? Wouldn't he intercede for us?" And Osiris thought about his dad, who spent most of his time worrying about wheat and barley, and figuring out ways to con Osiris into coming into the family business, and he replied, "Much as I love Amon, I think Pop ain't going to be much help. Mom's got him pretty well whipped. I don't think he's ever gotten past the vulture head. You know, they were sort of betrothed at birth kind of thing."

But they knew what had to be done, and so they went to see Mut.

It had been a particularly shitty day for Mut, that day they came, what with the sun halting in the heavens again, and the plague of murrain, and so when Osiris appeared in the throne room with Isis, Mut gave a little shriek with two of her three heads, shaking her plumes of truth. "Where the hell did *she* come from?!" she demanded. She was clearly distraught.

"You know my beloved?" Osiris cried.

"Know her...?" Mut screamed, "Of course I know her, you ignorant twit! She's your goddam *sister!*"

"Oops," said Osiris.

"Don't tell me you *did it!*" Mut howled. One look at the young lovers was enough. "Oh, name of the Trinitarian," Mut lamented, "no wonder I can't get the sun to work properly. You useless brat. I told your father sending one of the twins away wouldn't be enough, but oh no, not *him*, Mr. Soft Hearted!"

And she proceeded to strike Osiris dead. And Isis fell to her knees and tried to bring him back to life. And she tried real hard, she really did; but nothing. Naught. Zip. Yet her power was formidable, and she gave birth to their child right there in the throne room.

And Horus was looked upon by his grandmother Mut, and he was found comely in her eyes, and eventually she got it on with him, and when they cast the movie Mut was slapped around by Jack Nicholson till she admitted, "He's my husband...he's my grandson...he's my husband...he's my grandson...he's my husband *and* my grandson," and John Huston got off clean, no indictment at all, and the sequel lost a fortune.



is for NIDHOOG

Amos Gaskill met the only tree on Skillet Six Mile Flats neck-first. It was a stunted, ugly thing, the only tree out there on Skillet Six Mile Flats: it came thrusting up out of the hardpan at a fifty-degree angle, its roots aboveground like a junkheap of a thousand wicker chairs broken and cast abandoned, black and tangled, clots of hairy dirt embedded in the coils; the roots twisted and joined the bloated ugly thick and oily trunk in

gnarled sutures that could be imagined as charred open mouths sucking at pregnant bark; without leaf or bud, crippled limbs bent and flung in corrupt shapes against the gray sky; like a famously scorched corpse, all black and sooty, tormented in design, blighted in every particular; a single desperate shape gasping for life in blasted flatland.

They had to cut the rope by a third, and retie the knot, before they looped it over the topmost branch: at its original length, circling the black neck of Amos Gaskill, as black as the bole of the unlovely tree, he would have been standing on the chapped, cracked earth, the rope hanging limply past his shoulder. And even when they had cut it by a third, and retied the hangman's knot, and pulled him up tight, the best they could get was the toes of his work-boots barely scraping the hardpan, making irregular slashes in the ground as he choked and struggled and swung himself to and fro trying to get his legs to stretch that quarter of an inch so he might stand, and stop choking, and not die. But all he got was a shallow furrow below each boot, and the spittle and gagging and swollen tongue.

They passed the bottle of McCormick bourbon from man to man, till all four had depleted the aquifer by half. They scratched and squatted and shifted from foot to foot, all the while fascinated by the dying. Amos Gaskill was their first activity, and for a black guy who'd had the misfortune to stop at an ATM while they were sitting in the bank's parking lot around five in the morning, drinking and bragging about how they were going to make America a White Man's Nation once again, he was doing the dying pretty impressively.

Amos Gaskill seemed determined not to choke to death. He kept swinging, kept gagging, twisted even though his eyes had rolled back to show elephant ivory, twisted around and then spun back again; but wouldn't die. In fact, they had tied the knot so ineptly, had placed it so incorrectly, that even had they dropped him from a height, with his toes not scraping the gray claypan every time he moved, his neck would not have snapped, his breath would not have been cut off. They were simply too new at this business, and weren't very good workmen to begin with. In fact, had they wanted to do it properly, they might have hired Amos Gaskill to assist them: he was a master carpenter, cabinetmaker, bricklayer, and all-around excellent, meticulous handyman. He would have rigged the garrote imperially.

They muttered among themselves, *why the hell don't he die*, but Amos Gaskill all white-orbed and tendon-stretched, continued to thrash and tremble and almost snarl around his swollen tongue. And then they heard the faint ratchet sounds of rats nibbling beneath them. Not rats, no, perhaps not rats, too strong and getting louder to be rats; probably a prairie dog or a family of prairie dogs, maybe a mole, or a snake moving in its tunnel. And the sounds grew louder, with a peculiar echoing quality, like a twopenny nail being scraped along the stainless steel wall of a wind-tunnel or caisson sunk deep in the earth, like a vibration from the core coming to the surface. And the ground trembled, and the claypan fractured in tiny running-lines like the smile wrinkles on an octogenarian's face, and the rifts grew wider, deeper, and the dirt thrust up — a mound of it right under Amos Gaskill's feet, and he was able to stand, gasping, his eyes reappearing — and the limbs of the tree writhed as the kraken woke and slithered up the well, Hvergelmir, and broke the surface first with its many-nostriled snout, sniffing the dry heat of the Skillet Six Mile Flats, and then one eye on a twisting, moist stalk, looking around wildly for what had done the quickening, what had done the awakening, and then a portion of the head, immense and lumpy and gray as the dust itself, and then the rest of it, Nidhogg, Nidhoog, Nidhug, the gnawing life at the root of life, and it came forth in full, cracking their faces like cheap plastic, letting the blood run down its jerking shape to water the roots, and it dipped the limb till the rope slipped off, and it stared balefully at Amos Gaskill, and considered diet for a heartbeat, and then withdrew, leaving spasmed earth in its wake.

And Amos Gaskill gathered the pieces of the leaders of the White Man's Nation, and those that were not dry and could not be stacked by hand he spaded up with a shovel from the back of the little red pickup truck in which they'd brought him from the bank's parking lot very early that morning, and some of the pieces were simply too small or soggy, so he left them to rot in the heat, and he drove away from the lone tree in the middle of Skillet Six Mile Flats.

To be canny rulers of the White Man's Nation, one must know the answer to the question *why the hell don't he die*, which is: never lynch a man on Yggdrasil, the ash tree that is the foundation of the universe, the life tree at whose roots forever dwells and noshes the insatiable Nidhug.

Only fools try to kill someone on the tree of life.



is for ONI

From the *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*: "Oni: invisible devil-demons, whose presence may be detected because they sing, whistle or talk..."

O, I got plenty of Oni,
and Oni's plenty for me.
I got my Yin, I got my Yang,
I got my supernaturally.
Thass me...
O-neeeeee...
Yass, I got plenny of Oni,
An' Oni's the gaki fer me!
(Refrain, second verse, up-tempo.)



is for PHOENIX

The sightseeing bus to Paradise had left nearly an hour earlier, when the tourists from Billings, Montana came wandering back to the Fountain of Youth. Bernie sat on the lowermost branch of the Tree of Life, overlooking the Fountain, using an emery board on his talons and regularly preening his feathers. He watched their approach from the East, and thought to himself, *Here we go again*.

The husband and wife came trudging to the edge of the pool that surrounded the Fountain of Youth, and the woman sat down in the sand, and emptied her spectator pumps. Her husband, a corpulent man in his fifties, removed his straw hat, pulled a soiled handkerchief from his hip pocket, and swabbed at his sweating brow. He bent to take a drink from the Fountain.

"Probably not a terrific idea," Bernie said, spreading his wings and

fluffing through the range of scarlet into gold.

The tourist looked up. "Beg your pardon?"

"What I said," said the Phoenix, "is that it's not in your best interests to take a drink from this pool."

"We've been walking across the desert for about three hours," the man said. "I assume the tour bus left without us." The Phoenix nodded, aimed a wingtip toward the West.

"Well, a fine howdoyoudo that is," the wife of the tourist said, herself a tourist. "Just take off and abandon us without so much as a by-your-leave."

"They waited almost an hour," Bernie said. "The bus driver said something about having to get back for the Apocalypse, or somesuch. To be fair, though, they really couldn't provide any sort of 'by-your-leave,' because you weren't here."

"Three hours," the man said. "Three hours in the desert, walking back, just because one of the other people on the tour, I think an orthodontist from Beirut, said we could see the remains of the last four or five levels of the Tower of Babel if we walked over thataways."

"And you believed him?" Bernie asked, trying to restrain his amusement.

"Well..."

"And how much did he stick you for the map?" the Phoenix said.

"Map? What map?"

"Then what was it?"

"Er, uh, you mean the key?"

"Oh, that's sensational," Bernie said, unable to restrain himself any longer. "A key? He sold you a key? To what?"

"To the secret door in the base of the Tower of Ba—" He stopped. "You're trying to tell me we were hoodwinked?"

"Fleeced is more like it," the Phoenix said. "You know how many millennia it's been since that idiot Tower crumbled into dust?" He flicked his golden wings imperiously, impressively.

The tourists from Billings, Montana looked woebegone.

"What we're talking here," said Bernie, "is a real case of malfeasance on the job. Contract went to the lowest bidder, of course; which — in the case of a high-rise should make you more than a *bissel* nervous, if you catch my drift — meant that there was too much sand in the mix, the

design was sloppy, they hadn't even invented stressed concrete at that point; and forget the rebar. It was a very lousy job, but since nobody spoke the same language, who knew?"

"And it fell down?" the wife asked.

"Ka-boom."

"A long time ago, right?" her husband said.

"We're talking millennia, kiddo."

"Well, that's it, then," the man said. "We lay out fifty dollars for a key to something that doesn't exist; and we miss getting back to our bus; and now you're telling me that I shouldn't even take a drink, something I desperately need after three hours in the goddam desert? And who, may I ask, are you?"

"Phoenix," Bernie said. "But you can call me Bernie; even my enemies call me Bernie."

"Why aren't you ashes?" the wife asked.

Bernie gave her a look. Arched eyebrows. Querulous mien. "That's not till I make my exit. Very impressive, but not just yet, thank you. I'm only seven hundred and thirty-two. I've got at least another good two hundred and fifty in me."

The man edged closer to the pool.

"Then you go poof?" the wife asked.

"According to the rules, there can only be one Phoenix at a time," Bernie said. Then, lightheartedly, "There can only be one Minneapolis at a time, also, but that's another story." He chuckled, and added, "Get away from the pool, buddy."

The tourist from Billings stopped creeping toward the water of the Fountain of Youth, and looked up at the Phoenix. "So you're the one and only Phoenix...at the moment."

"Indeed," Bernie said. "My predecessor, Achmed, lived to be nearly a thousand years old. Nice chap. Bit stuffy, but what the hell can you expect from a Fundamentalist. Not a lot of laughs in their religion."

"I need a drink," the woman said.

"As I told your husband — I presume this gentleman is your spouse, yes? — it is really not a spectacular idea to drink from the pool."

"And why is that?"

"Because this is the Fountain of Youth, m'dear; and if you drink from

it, not only will you get younger, but you'll live forever. What we, in the Phoenix game, call 'immortality.'"

The tourists from Billings, Montana looked at each other, and in a flash, or possibly a flash and a half, before Bernie could say anything more, they flung themselves forward; faces immersed in the silvery water of the pool that eternally refilled itself from the Fountain of Youth, they drank and drank, and drank deeply. Occasionally, a water belch would break the surface.

When they rose, the bloom of youth was in their cheeks. Magnolias. Or possibly phlox.

They stood, tall and strong-limbed, with the gleam of far horizons in their eyes. The wife put her shoes on; the husband clapped the straw hat on his head; with a wink and a nod, the husband turned and began to stride off toward the West. His wife smiled up at Bernie, gave him a small salute, and said, "Take care of yourself, Bernie," and she strode off after her husband.

Bernie sat there picking his teeth with a talon, fluffing back down from gold to scarlet, and sighed a deep seven hundred and thirty-two year sigh. "There's one born every minute," he said, to no one in particular.

The Phoenix smiled, and drifted off into a pleasant doze in which he would reflect on the ramifications of the genes of the gullible polluting the pool.



is for QIONG-SHI

It was night again, and the vampire was on the prowl. San Francisco's Chinatown was roiling with fog. The dim and ominous shapes of buildings seemed to slip in and out of the real world as vagrant light from lampposts filtered through breaks in the swirling gray mist shroud.

Hopping at a regular pace, arms outstretched before it, the qiong-shi sought a fresh victim. Up Powell, down Grand, back and forth through narrow alleys, the vampire hopped, a pale, cadaverous nightmare in moist, fog-clinging funereal robes. At the corner of Kerouac Alley and Columbus Avenue the prowl car spotted him, bouncing high and landing lightly.

They turned on the gumball machine and slewed to a stop crosswise

across the alley mouth. Compensating for the bulk of the prowl car, the vampire came down at an impossible angle, and hit the wall of the building. He fell to his knees, and crouched there, trembling, arms outstretched, eyes glaring at nothing.

The officers leapt from the car, threw down on him, and ordered him to hug the pavement. The qiong-shi got to his feet unsteadily, a great bloodless gash across his sulphur-colored forehead, and bounced toward the cops. The rookie fired a warning shot, and the sergeant commanded the suspect to stop.

But the vampire was already in the air, descending in a great looping arc toward the pair. When he hit, they were there, and the sergeant had his baton at ready.

They beat the shit out of the vampire for a considerable time, knocking him to the pavement every time he hopped up. It went on for the better part of a half hour, all of it being filmed by camcorders in the hands of one hundred and thirteen residents of the neighborhood, and a television cameraman circling overhead in a chopper.

When it came to trial, the Chinese-American Protective League and three tong gangs paid for the best attorneys in the state, and the vampire got only two years up at Pelican Bay for assaulting an officer. Or two.

Apart from his special dietary needs — without a doubt Q was a moveable feast — the qiong-shi comported himself well, became the bitch of a serial razor-killer named Mojo Paw, and was paroled into a halfway house after only sixteen months.

Rehabilitation was swift, the vampire responded to group analysis, and later ran for public office.

He lost. Big. His opponent, an ex-TV talk show host, beat heavily on the theme: *Be Careful What You Vote For, You Might Get It!*



is for RAVEN

I'm sick to death of it, let me tell you! Just fed up! Photosynthesize. Grandiloquent. Tumultuous. Matriculation. Portcullis. Cytoplasmic.

Euphonium. Oleomargarine. Nascent. Extemporaneous. Schottische. Captious. Heterogeneous. Marginalia. Oxymoron. Xylophone. Sephardic. Perambulation.

Sick to death, I tell you.

Disgusting stereotypes, that's all it is!

Nevermore, my ass.



is for SERAPHIM

Good hit, lousy field. Traded down to the Pony League.



is for TAHAMTAN

PRESS RELEASE. Dateline: Hollywood. 17 April.

Paramount Pictures today announced the resumption of production on the multi-million-dollar theatrical feature *Tahamtan, Warrior of Persia*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Based on the life of the legendary mythical hero who lived 2000 years ago, the film has been plagued by union strikes, unexplained accidents on the set, and the untimely death of the original scenarist, Rostam Shayegani, who passed away while only halfway through the screenplay.

Prior to Paramount's commitment to filming the great myth of pre-Iranian Persia, the last person to write about Tahamtan died of grief. Ferdoci was commissioned by King Darush, the Persian ruler, to write a book of the myths and legends surrounding Tahamtan, in order to preserve old Pharsi. He was promised a gold coin for each verse. Over a period of thirty years Ferdoci wrote between fifty and sixty thousand verses.

Darush, direct lineal ancestor of the current head of production at Paramount Studios, contested the bookkeeping and royalty arrangement

originally entered into with Ferdoci, and paid him in silver, rather than gold. Ferdoci, according to informed sources, was so upset, that he flung the money back at the Prince, and went off to die of a broken heart, leaving behind a curse upon all Persia.

Since then, Iran has been invaded by the Moslems, and Pharsi has been debased. Ferdoci's book was the last one written in the true language until Paramount's signing this week of a new scenarist guaranteed, by studio executives, to deliver a shootable script.

Paramount Pictures today proudly announce resumption of the film *Tahamtan, Warrior of Persia*, starring Schwarzenegger, Sharon Stone, Danny DeVito, Sean Young and Zalman King as Rakhsh; directed by Alan Smithee; screenplay by Salman Rushdie.



is for UNSEELIE

The Seelie Court, the general Scottish name for the good fairies, can be considered, at best, cranky and best left alone by humans. Far worse are the fairies of the *Unseelie Court*. Their hatred of humans is monumental. They comprise the *sluagh*, the band of the unsanctified dead who hover above the earth, snatching up to themselves the undefended mortals they then use to rain down elf-shot against men and cattle.

And you thought it was Martians disemboweling your cows. Boy, how superstitious can you get!



is for VIGINAE

Minuscule in size, they are demon imps who make their homes at the root of human nose hairs.

No other demons will associate with them.

Chadwick makes a Groomette nose hair cutter recommended in all the best grimoires.

Best to rid oneself of the snotty little bastards.



is for WYVERN

"Would you prefer the couch, or just hanging there in mid-air?" The psychiatrist, Dr. Eugene Bucovitz, MD, Ph.D., FAPA, Mbr AMA-APA & SCPS, Diplomate American Board of Psychiatry & Neurology, Inc., stared up at the three-headed dragon hovering less than a foot beneath the ceiling of his office in Westwood. "If you have no preference, might I suggest the couch...your, uh, breath seems to be singeing the inlaid tropical wood ceiling."

The wyvern's middle head glared down at the doctor.

"Meaning no offense," the doctor said hastily.

The wyvern settled slowly to the floor, ambled to the couch and lay down. Its three heads, on the three ropey strands of muscled neck, remained nearly vertical, though the bulbous body, with its two eagle-like legs and its barbed tail, hung over the sides of the leather chaise. "We have problems," the left head said.

"Of course you do," said Dr. Bucovitz, "and I'm here to help you...or rather, to help you help *yourself*. That's why Dr. Hildreth referred you to me."

"We heard good things about you," the right head said.

"You did wonders with Ghidrah, we understand," said the middle head.

Bucovitz smiled, then sighed. "Yes, one of my successes. But don't ask about Mothra. I still lament my failure there."

"No one's perfect," said the left head.

"Except Godzilla," said the right.

"Do you *always* have to add your two cents?" the left head said, with a snap of ice-crusher jaws. "Just because you had her."

"Now stop fighting, you two," said the middle head with a tone of mixed exasperation and mollification.

"Up yours, peacemaker," said the left.

"Bite it, big boy," said the right.

"You see what I have to put up with, Doctor?" said the middle, his eyebrows arching helplessly. "We have problems."

"Uh, excuse me," said Dr. Bucovitz, "did I understand you correctly? Did you say Godzilla was 'she'?"

"Big mouth!" the right head said to the left head. "Now the lizard's really out of the closet!"

"Oh, sure, I'm the gay one here, right?"

"No, you're the homophobe!"

"Flex in here, you shit, I'd like to bite off your eyelids!"

"Yo' mama!"

"Now, now, now!" Bucovitz said, waving his hands. "You really can't go on like this!" His words went unheard, however. The three heads were snapping at each other, twining and untwining, undulating and striking. "Stop it!" the psychiatrist shouted. "Stop it at once, you're the worst patient I've had in here since that little kiss-up E.T." He paused, then added, "Or Streisand."

But there was no hearing him. The three heads of the wyvern lashed at one another, knocking holes in the wall, tearing gobbets of leather from the chaise, clacking and snapping and deafening everyone in the waiting room.

Bucovitz was thrown from his chair by the left head as it performed a loop-the-loop in an attempt at burying its fangs in the carotid of the right head. The psychiatrist crawled to the intercom and slapped open the switch with a bloody hand.

"Ms. Crossen, quickly! I need a second opinion here. Get me Dr. Cerberus immediately!"

Great gouts of flame and thick, oily smoke now filled the office. In the murk Bucovitz could hear the wyvern trying to bite off its own heads. He tried to crawl to the door leading to the safety of the reception room, but the dragon had smashed so much furniture that the exit was blocked. Bucovitz lay in a corner, his head covered by his arms, silently wishing he had gone into electrical engineering.

Suddenly, there was silence.

Bucovitz crawled across the office. He reached the French doors that

opened onto the balcony overlooking his townhouse's central garden court. Fumbling through the thick, roiling smoke, he found the latch and lifted it. He threw the doors open and crawled out onto the balcony. Smoke poured out of the room.

As the smoke thinned, he lay on the balcony looking back into the office. Shambles. The definition of the word *shambles*. "Wait'll you get my bill!" he shouted. But from the thinning veil of smoke there was no answer.

"You'd better have damned good Blue Cross!"

Still no answer.

"You do *have* coverage, don't you?"

Silence.

"Answer me! Dammit, *answer* me!"

Now the smoke was clearing, and the wyvern could be seen lying in a spavined, sprawled, sanguine heap, each head smiling contentedly. The middle head looked up and winked at Dr. Bucovitz. "Didn't you wonder why Dr. Hildreth, who hates your guts since you stole his wife and practice, and almost got him disbarred, referred us to you?"

"No...you can't mean..."

"Doctor," said all three heads in unison, "we have problems. And so do you."

What is the sound of one psychiatrist weeping?



is for XOLAS

From the Alacalufs, the indigenous natives of Tierra del Fuego, we learn of the supreme being Xolas, who infuses the newborn child with soul upon its birth, who reabsorbs that soul when death takes the vessel.

Last week Xolas had a garage sale.

Your mother bought two floor lamps with tassel-fringed shades, a lava lamp, and the slightly soiled soul of Joseph Stalin.

Guess what you're getting for your birthday?



is for YOG-SOTHOTH

More terrible than even those who "created" him could know. They did not dream him into fiction. *He* dreamed *them* into life. There was no being named Howard Phillips Lovecraft, no man named Clark Ashton Smith. Bits of cosmic debris inhaled by the Great Old One, they were blown back out in the shapes that would create the dream of the god on this side of the rift. But its name is not Yog-Sothoth. When the dream-men Lovecraft and Smith absorbed the directions for creation, to build the being that would be worshipped first by readers, then by cultists, then by all...the message was garbled by the veil, warped as it came through the rift. Its name is not Yog-Sothoth. When the anagram is unraveled, and the true name is written, the veil will split, the rift will open, the darkness will come.

At M.I.T., right now, a hacker with too much time on his hands, grown bored with computer bulletin boards, role-playing games, and cheap paperback novels, is running a decoding program.

How many variations can you make from the name Yog-Sothoth? The hacker is only fifteen minutes ahead of you. Closing your windows will not keep the darkness from seeping in.



is for ZEUS

Chief deity of the Greek pantheon, called the father by both gods and men, he was an abused child, having been snatched from the jaws of death by his mother, Rhea, when his father, Cronus, decided to eat his children.

Like father, like son.

Don't invite Zeus to dinner.

Talk about disgusting table manners. ☠



BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

The River King, by Alice Hoffman, Putnam, 2000, \$23.95.

I CONSIDER Alice Hoffman to be one of the best fantasists writing today; though perhaps I should say one of the best practitioners of mythic fiction, a term coined by Terri Windling to describe stories that deal with the relationships characters have with each other, with themselves, and with the world in which they live that use mythological and folkloric material either as a resonating mirror, or to illuminate those same concerns by allowing interior landscapes and emotional states to appear physically "on stage" with what most would consider more realistically portrayed elements. (For a longer discussion on this subject, you should visit Terri's website at www.endicott-studio.com.) Hoffman, undoubtedly, simply considers herself a writer, though

she has been quoted as saying, "I'm telling fairy tales for grown-ups."

But by any description, with book after book, she remains at the top of her field and she's one of those few writers who, when I get a new novel by her, whatever else I'm reading gets put aside until her book is done. (The list of such authors is short and also includes a few other names that usually aren't appropriate to discuss in this column, such as Andrew Vachas and Barbara Kingsolver...but I digress.)

As is usual with a new Hoffman book, *The River King* jumped the queue and was started immediately. And also, as usual, I wasn't disappointed for a moment.

This time out she takes us to the fictional small town of Haddan, Massachusetts, an environment divided in two between those native to the town, and those attending the Haddan School, a prestigious boarding school. The focus starts out on a couple of misfits attending the school, but when one of them

dies — apparently a suicide — and the local police become involved, old secrets and new take center stage, and the already-divided town becomes a hotbed of tension.

What I like about Hoffman's writing is that everything is of equal importance. The backdrop of Haddan and the natural flora and fauna of New England are as much characters as the humans. And whether she takes us into the heads of one of the misfit students, various members of the faculty, or even the investigating police officer, the characters all ring individual and true. Unlike many literary writers, she's not afraid of Story, but her prose is gorgeous as well as functional. In other words, there's balance to her work, but also variety and beauty.

When she steps away from the known world into the magical, there's no sense of a dividing line. Ghosts appear in photographs, only seen by the camera, and they leave cryptic messages like pockets full of fish and river water, or the scent of roses, but these paranormal elements grow naturally out of the story and it's often the more mundane aspects that seem the most magical. Perhaps this is because, as Hoffman has said in a recent interview, "If you look at anything long

enough or closely enough, it feels like magic."

Whatever the reason, I come away from her work with more of a sense of wonder than I do the greater portion of what's marketed as fantasy, which makes *The River King*, the latest in a string of jewels from Hoffman's keyboard, a deeply satisfying book.

The Third Cry to Legba and Other Invocations, by Manly Wade Wellman, Night Shade Books, 2000, \$35.

For a while there I was afraid we were losing too much of the history of our genre. With the glut of new books being written and published today, there seems to be less and less market space or interest in keeping the classic work in print — especially classic work that doesn't have quite the high profile of, say, the recent reissue of some of Lord Dunsany's novels.

Don't get me wrong — I greatly appreciate the fact that those sorts of books are back in print. But it seems there isn't the same room for work that doesn't have as much cachet, such as the stories by authors who primarily were published in the old pulps, or books that are more recent classics but,

for whatever reason, their authors have fallen out of favor with the big publishers.

E-books are helping to make up for this lack. For instance, I'm delighted to see that one of my favorite books, R. A. MacAvoy's *Tea with the Black Dragon* is back "in print" at www.peanutpress.com. But while I can read and enjoy an e-book, I still prefer the feel of paper in hand, the weight of the volume. And this is where the small press comes in.

Long before the Internet, small presses and specialty publishers were keeping all sorts of wonderful books in print and happily that tradition continues today. Donald Grant, Arkham House...there's a long list of small press publishers who took the best of the pulps and presented them to us in quality, archival editions. To that list we can also add Night Shade Books, based in San Francisco, who are going to do the same for Manly Wade Wellman's work as the above publishers did for the likes of Robert E. Howard, H. P. Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, and other favorites.

I think the biggest surprise for new readers to Wellman's work will be how readable and timeless his fiction remains, sixty-some years after its initial publication in the

original *Weird Tales* and the like. Yes, there are some old-fashioned elements, but nothing jarring or dull. Wellman's research was always impeccable, his imagination a delight, his plots intriguing. From the opening tale of voodoo in a big city night club (the title story) to the final entry of vampires on the set of a musical in a small New England town ("Chastel"), the reader remains in the sure hands of a master storyteller.

This present volume will be the first of a projected five, collecting all of Wellman's short fiction—a real boon to those of us who missed out on the two Carcosa Press volumes that came out a couple of decades ago. You'll find here two of Wellman's series characters: John Thunstone, a quick-witted and larger-than-life adventurer, and Lee Cobbett, more of an Everyman figure; both of them ready, able, and willing to stand between us and the weird things that lie in wait for us at the shadowy edges of the world.

I loved reacquainting myself with these characters and I'm now looking forward to future volumes (if Night Shade Books stays on schedule, volume two should be out in the late spring of 2001), in particular those that will feature my favorite of Wellman's characters, Silver

John the Balladeer. This is what small press publishing should be doing: maintaining a sense of history for us with the publication of such worthy books.

But while I'm grateful to the small presses for these publications, and to the Internet for e-books, I still wish the big name publishers would concentrate a little more on some of these lost classics as well. As it stands, you have to know what you're looking for, and where to look for it, and the general reader, who usually goes no further than the big chain book stores to look for his or her new books, will often not even get the chance to see what else is available.

And that's a shame. Not only from a historical viewpoint, but also for the sheer entertainment value of books such as *The Third Cry to Legba* that those readers will be missing.

Spike & Dru: Pretty Maids All in a Row, by Christopher Golden, Pocket Books, 2000, \$22.95.

I know what long-time readers of this column will be thinking: Here's de Lint, forever going on in a less-than-positive manner about franchise novels and trilogies and series, yet here he is reviewing a

book related to the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series. So what gives?

Well, I still believe that franchise novels (books based on a franchise such as *Star Wars*, etc.) are usually unsatisfying, and too many f/sf trilogies and series are either derivative, repetitive, or both. But it doesn't mean they can't be done right. Or that they can't be fun.

Fun is one of the reasons we read in the genre. Literate works make for a great meal, but that doesn't mean we can't have dessert.

This particular book intrigued me for a number of reasons. First, I enjoy the show and after a summer of re-runs (I write this in early September 2000), I was in the mood for a fix. Second, I've enjoyed other books by Christopher Golden, so I trusted he'd give me value here. Third, the title alone told me that this was a chance where a franchise novel could be done right.

As I've mentioned before in other columns, what I don't like about these sorts of books is that the characters are set by the Bible of the show or film that the story is based on. The writers can't change that. The characters have to be the same at the end of the book as they were going in, because otherwise it would be far too confusing trying to

coordinate all the various books and comics that are being produced.

The way to get around that is to do what Golden has done: pick a couple of the peripheral, yet still popular characters from the series — in this case Spike and Drusilla (the Sid Vicious of the vampire world and his wacky paramour) — and set the book sixty years before the series takes place so that, except for the undead, none of the other characters have even been born yet.

Of course, this still means that Spike and Dru have to remain constant. But that becomes irrelevant because Golden gets to create a whole other cast of new characters who live and die and grow and change. And he does it very well. The characters he's created for this book are for the most part a wonderful, multidimensional group.

I'm not going to talk too much about the plot because if you enjoy the television series, you'll enjoy this book; if you don't care for it, nothing I'm going to say here will change your mind. But I will say — for fellow aficionados of the show — that Golden has done a convincing job of capturing the pair on paper. And setting the novel in World War II, giving us a detailed

visit with the Council of Watchers, and introducing us to the (then) current Slayer and a number of Slayers-in-waiting makes for a fascinating foray into the mythology of the world created by Joss Whedon.

And for those of you tired of the chip-in-his-head, can't-be-nasty-anymore Spike from the last season of the show, the big bad, as he likes to call himself, is definitely back here.

Golden gets away with things that they could never do on the show — not because of budget constraints (though to film this would cost a fortune), but because there wouldn't be much of a continuing cast.

So has he converted me to franchise novels? Not really. I've dipped into one or two previous books in this series and not found them nearly so intriguing. But I'll certainly keep my eye out for the next one Golden does himself.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. 

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Travel Arrangements, short stories by M. John Harrison, Victor Gollancz, London, 2000, £16.99.

1984: Selected Letters, by Samuel R. Delany, Voyant Publishing, 2000, \$17.95.

Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainments, by Michael Dirda, Indiana University Press, 2000, \$24.95.

Snake 'N' Bacon's Cartoon Cabaret, by Michael Kupperman, HarperEntertainment, 2000, \$13.

THE INTEGRITY STIPEND

A FEW months ago a journalist told me how he'd recently interviewed a graphic artist — the same sad old story, a brilliant young woman and promising RISD grad, forced to toil in the commercial cesspool to make ends meet.

"The thing is," she admitted, "I always thought I'd be getting an integrity stipend."

The integrity stipend! It's been ages since I'd even thought of it; probably not since buying Paul Westerburg's last album. So few artists bother with it these days. They either check in directly with their career counselors, and proceed directly to day jobs; or else they check out, permanently (see recent NIMH statistics for rates of suicide and clinical depression among creative individuals).

Still, if ever there were an artist who deserved the stipend (and a generous one) for a body of brilliant, masterful work, it would be M. John Harrison. Since the appearance of his first story in *New Worlds* thirty-odd years ago, Harrison has defied categorization, even as he's invited comparison with the likes of J. G. Ballard and Mervyn Peake. Harrison is perhaps best-known for the *Viriconium* sequence — *The Pastel City*, *A Storm of Wings*, *In*

Viriconium and the story collection *Viriconium Nights* — fuliginously dark, mordant and exceptionally haunting novels which are among the masterpieces of twentieth-century fantasy (and which have been reissued as such, in the UK's Fantasy Masterworks series).

What is most remarkable about Harrison is not that he is now, belatedly, being recognized as one of the great writers of our time, but that he just keeps getting better. His last two novels, *The Course of the Heart* and *Signs of Life*, were among the best books of the 1990s. With the exception of James Salter, I can think of no other writer who has consistently produced such stellar, unapologetically grown-up work.

Salter, author of *A Sport and a Pastime* and the heartbreakingly *Light Years*, is commonly regarded as being the writer's writer's writer; he may not be the first person who springs to mind when discussing British genre authors. Yet, in addition to the clarity of their prose — both favor a deceptively supple, stripped-down style that makes prime use of overheard dialog, as well as of rapturous descriptions of the natural world — Harrison and Salter are, above all else, majorly Guy Writers, writing about Impor-

tant Guy Things. In Salter's case, these include fighter pilots and sexual infidelity; in Harrison's, rock climbers and sexual despair. Both publish far too infrequently to satisfy their readers, which makes the appearance of Harrison's new story collection, *Travel Arrangements*, a matter of not inconsiderable, if muted, joy, since the book is not available in the U.S.

Travel Arrangements gathers fourteen stories, dating from 1983 to 1999. Most originally appeared in theme anthologies, and most were published in the UK (two of the exceptions had their first appearance in this magazine). This is salient, because Harrison is not just an extremely English writer, but a ferociously quirky one, and not necessarily for the reasons that often doom ferociously quirky writers.

Harrison's work has always relied on a powerful grounding in the mundane. Even the Viriconium sequence, set in one of the most dazzling, lapidary, and baroque Dying Earths ever envisioned, has about it the pungent reek of everyday life — doomed scholars of arcana worrying about their teeth, alien invasions triggering not just panic but a palpable sense of ennui and thwarted plans for commerce. Existential high fantasy is a tricky thing

to pull off, but existential, in-your-face urban fantasy — which is what most of the stories in *Travel Arrangements* are — is even trickier.

On the face of it, this wouldn't seem to be the case: but the rigorous calculation of most — almost all — contemporary urban fantasy leaves little room for genuinely mindbending work. The willing suspension of disbelief upon which our literary ghetto is built includes an ironclad infrastructure of reliable, pre-cut devices: teenage runaways bumping into punk elves, disaffected faerie musicians running into punk kids, that sort of thing, with a pop gloss of cultural references du jour — tattoos, piercings, Napster, whatever — standing in for genuine strangeness, or that sense of profoundly dislocating exile which informs the greatest literary fantasy, from Lord Dunsany to John Crowley. If one removes all the bells and whistles of contemporary genre fiction — the thrills, the suspense, the ghosts in the machines, the machines themselves, from computers to fembots to gene splicers and dicers in the grocery aisles — one is left with very little to entertain or enlighten readers with a taste for transcendence, or even just something resembling Real Life in the 21st century, where

the Future butts up against the Everyday, every day.

Harrison has been writing about the way we live right now for some time. His territory, while amply seeded with computer simulations, ghosts, and genetically engineered individuals, is mostly populated by the walking wounded, Beautiful Losers, in Leonard Cohen's term, but beauty is the operative word here. In the best gothic tradition, Harrison is a poet of the ruins. His ruins include old women lunching in department store restaurants, couples capsized on the shoals of failed marriages, parents haunted by the loss of children, children by the loss of childhood: a daisy chain of regret and mourning.

Yet, improbably and despite its overtones of *Dispiritus Mundi* (this is where the brilliance kicks in), Harrison's writing is neither grim nor depressing: it shines and cuts, black and sharp as an obsidian blade. At its very best, it can give a reader the sort of high usually associated with illegal drugs or the more extreme forms of religious experience. Harrison's late work is concerned above all with the search for ecstasy and meaning, usually through sexual or romantic union. Not surprisingly, in Art as in Life, his

characters seldom achieve the transcendence they seek; what is remarkable is that the reader can. Harrison might be describing his own work when he writes

...the things which happened to you thereafter in that place would be both constructive and destructive of the spirit: things fundamentally and irreversibly transforming. You would go willingly, though in horror, return ecstatic but ruined. Magic!

Implicit here is the knowledge that *transcendence* is not the same as *understanding*. Harrison's work can be inexplicably strange and disturbing, as in the bizarre contact with the supernatural divined (I think) in "Gifco" or the Ballard-esque, noir manipulations of "The Neon Heart Murders." At its best, Harrison's depiction of the supernatural is grounded by his uncanny, and often hilarious, knack for evoking the serenely mundane —

This place, which was entered through the underwear department, would be packed at lunchtime with fifty or sixty old women, crouching among the pot plants on uncomfor-

table chrome chairs. They wore huge silver crucifixes and imitation silk scarves, neck-braces, velvet turban hats, coats like blankets with voluminous sleeves, and they made a sound like a distant lunatic asylum. Only thick carpets and the vestiges of their own caution muted the shrieks of greed and envy, dismay and growing formless horror.

'Anyway,' they would say to one another, getting up clumsily and staring across the table with groans of covert violence, 'it's really been very nice.'

The stories in *Travel Arrangements* dart in and out of the grand terra incognita of Harrison's earlier work. "Anima" reads like a compressed file of *Signs of Life*. "Seven Guesses of the Heart," this collection's only overt piece of fantasy, seems like a benign green offshoot of Viriconium's world-tree. The finest stories are the most recent, "Black Houses" and "Science & the Arts." Neither could easily be described as genre work. "Science & the Arts" was published in the *London Times Literary Supplement*; it is a relief to see that, in the UK, at least, he is receiving the

recognition he deserves. M. John Harrison is one of the last (or first) late-modern visionaries —

In those days he made you feel that some revelation was imminent, something that had little to do with our social conscience, or even our society, something about being human that it was intolerable for us, in this century, not to know.

Samuel R. Delany is another writer who knows something about being human at the turn of the millennium. The correspondence gathered in 1984: *Selected Letters* form an *aviso* from the frontlines of the twentieth century directed to us where we sit, exhausted, on the vanguard of the twenty-first. In his introduction to the collection, Ken James points out that these 351 pages comprise only *fifty-seven* letters, creamed from one year in this prolific, protean writer's life. Suffice it to say that Delany crams more insight, wit, and provocation into fifty-seven letters than most of us fit into a lifetime.

Delany's fierce intelligence is on ample display here, as is his good humor and disarming (or alarming, depending on your sexual, political, medical or religious views) penchant for describing raw sex. Like de Sade and Bataille, Delany breathes and speaks sex: it's a lan-

guage for him, and readers familiar only with his classic, early science fiction novels (*Nova*, *Triton*, *Babel-17*) may be discomfited by some of the correspondence here, clearly written by the author of *The Mad Man* and *Hogg*, novels that pushed (hell, *broke*) the envelope for literary pornography. Delany's city in 1984 is New York B. G. (Before Giuliani) — grittier, smarter, more dangerous and more enthralling than the millennial metropolis.

There's enough great stuff here to fuel years of debate and discussion, on everything from literature to postmodern academic theory to AIDS to good old-fashioned sci fi. One letter, to Camilla Decarnin, contains more astute and genuinely useful advice to writers, new or world-weary, than any ten writers' workshops or How-To books on (ugh) *craft*. In another, to Robert S. Bravard, Delany laments:

Robert Scholes was presenting a paper "Le Guin and Derrida;" I actually felt a tiny thrill of jealousy: "Why," I wondered, "isn't that paper about Derrida and me?" I walked on consoling myself: "Well, I'm probably mentioned in it somewhere."

Not to worry. In his novels,

criticism, and now his letters, Samuel R. Delany left an indelible mark upon the last century, and there's little doubt he'll continue to do the same in the present one.

Michael Dirda, writer and senior editor of the *Washington Post Book World*, would be another candidate for the Integrity Stipend, but in 1993 he received the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism, and that's probably just as good. *Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainments* collects almost fifty of Dirda's bi-weekly "Readings" columns from *Book World*. It's hard to think of another Pulitzer Prize winner whose work could be described as unabashedly boyish in its enthusiasm; but then, it's hard to think of another Pulitzer Prize winner who can quote freely from people as diverse as P. G. Wodehouse, Howard Waldrop, Ross Thomas, Vladimir Nabokov, Olaf Stapledon, Raymond Chandler, Flann O'Brien, Guy Davenport, Lord Dunsany, and Edward Gorey.

Dirda's writing is equal parts melancholy and *très amusant*; he gives equal time to exhilarating boyhood reminiscences of discovering dirty books, and to the joys of Peter Brook's breakthrough staging of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." He can be as funny as Dave Barry

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(though Dave Barry with a good thesaurus and personal knowledge of Marcus Aurelius). And he can break your heart, as in the beautiful, poignant, "Listening to My Father," Dirda's tribute to his steel-worker father.

"I never saw my dad read a book in his life," Dirda writes, then goes on to describe how this difficult man "introduced me to the beauty and evocative power of words," through storytelling and by making certain there were always books in the house Dirda shared with his mother and sisters.

Elsewhere in *Readings*, one can find the hilarious "Weekend with

Wodehouse," trenchant "Commencement Advice;" and a listing of the 100 Best Comic Novels, from *Leave It to Psmith* to *Ulysses*. All this and more, from someone who has championed John Crowley, Gene Wolfe, and J. K. Rowling (before she was famous); a literary critic unafraid to evoke Bertolt Brecht and *The X-Files* in the same breath.

Fittingly, the last essay in here is called "Millennial Readings;" it showcases both Dirda's melancholy insight and his unquenchable optimism, as well as his unabashed love for that frayed magic carpet, *The Book*. *Readings* is pure gold, the ideal holiday lagniappe for any lover of literature of the past, present, or future.

Coda: Last year, the *Washington Post* unforgivably stopped making *Book World* available by subscription, but Dirda's essays and reviews (and the rest of *Book World*) can still be found every week on the Post's Web site, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/style/books/>

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT —

Living in the boonies as I do, I somehow entered Extremely Early Middle Age without ever having heard of Mark Kupperman, artiste and cre-

ative genius behind *Snake 'N' Bacon's Cartoon Cabaret*. I can only surmise that people living everywhere else on Earth have been reading his comics in alternative newsmagazines for decades now: yet another reason for me to feel inferior and ashamed next time I visit Manhattan.

Still, better late than never. *Snake 'N' Bacon's Cartoon Cabaret* is the funniest thing I have experienced since first being exposed to Monty Python, back in the last Ice Age, or first seeing the Three Stooges in the middle Cenozoic. Anyone who can come up with panel titles like

***Bob Dylan in
"HOUSE FULLA MURDER"***

or

***THE NARCOTICS MURDERS: THEY'RE LOVELY!
Whoops — not lovely, Horrible***

deserves a Pulitzer Prize, or a Nobel. Something, anyway. Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* has long occupied its space, alone, on my Funniest Book Ever Written shelf; but now I've had to make room for this one. *Snake 'N' Bacon's Cartoon Cabaret* is the other funniest book ever written. And it has pictures. 

Michael Thomas lives in the vicinity of the Motor City and works as the editor of the Michigan Psychiatric Society newsletter. He and his wife adopted an abandoned, abused dog who makes a wonderful companion, save for her propensity for stealing the odd item (reading glasses, the TV remote, an occasional book....). This story takes the dog's tendency, applies the author's keen insight into psychology, and results in an affecting science fiction story.

Queen of Thieves

By Michael Thomas

ASPEN SPOTTED THE MARK and sent Little Gil scrambling through the crowd of suits and smartcars to fetch Rachel. From her perch in the rafters of the abandoned warehouse, Rachel listened to the boy, her good eye bright, her bad eye in the ruined side of her face as dead as a fish gone belly up, then she called Max over.

"Watch the family," Rachel said. "There's slavers about." As if hiding them from sight, Max maneuvered his bulk before the younger children — cherub-faced Roy Boyd, Rough Neck, Julie, Cinnamon and the others. Max was slow, but he was as old as Rachel, stubble already dotting his chin and his voice turning to gravel. "Maybe we'll eat this week," Rachel said and let Little Gil lead her away.

They raced the alleys past Rush Street and Fifth, dodging rollie pollies and feral dogs until they found Aspen perched on the cement wall in Heart Plaza. Aspen grinned and sucked a fruit ice, pointing a grimy finger into the noonday crowd.

Rachel searched the crowd of suits until she focused on the gray-haired

man and his elegant lady lounging by the fountain. "Why him?" she asked.

Aspen shrugged her shoulders. "Trailed him from the highbank. Saw him pat his pockets all the time. Big big bulge there."

"Need a dodge?" Little Gil asked.

Rachel shook her head. Too dangerous in broad daylight to risk the little boy. She checked for rollie pollies or robot cars, but saw only suits and a rainbow arcing through the fountain spray. Rachel sized up the situation, blocking out anything irrelevant to her goal, then scrambled toward the mark. People, when they noticed the girl at all, made way for her as if stepping around dog shit. Mostly, they tried to avoid looking at her ruined face (left side of her face like melted wax, eye hanging low on the cheek, the stuff of nightmare vids). Rachel ignored the stares; for most of her life, Rachel had been stared at and avoided. None of that mattered anymore. The kids needed money. These people had the money. Nothing else in life mattered.

Rachel eased behind the gray-haired man, slipped on her pathetic look and tugged at the man's arm. He flinched at the touch and turned. His eyes narrowed and his mouth formed an O.

"Please, sir," Rachel said. "You dropped this." She opened her hand to display a tiny data chip resting on her palm. Instinctively, the man's hand moved to his left suit pocket.

"Why, I don't know," he said.

The woman looked down at Rachel, her initial shock yielding into pity. The man reached into his pocket and extracted a handful of data chips. "I don't know," he said. "I thought I only had five."

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. "I saw it fall right there by your pants leg. Maybe I made a mistake. I'll keep it."

She turned to leave, felt the pressure of a hand on her shoulder. She had him. She turned to make sure she owned the woman. "You're very pretty," she said.

The woman smiled. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Rachel."

"It's a lovely name," she said.

"At least my name's lovely," Rachel said.

Heartbreak flared on the woman's face.

"Let me see that chip," the man said, replacing his own chips in his pocket.

Rachel handed him the chip, turning to his side as she did so, her thin hand, as light as cotton candy, slipped into his pocket and retrieved a chip.

"No, no, I don't think this is mine," the man said handing it back to Rachel. "But thank you very much, young lady."

Rachel smiled up at the man, then froze. The rollie pollie appeared behind them in flak jacket and mirrored shades. Play innocent? If only she could see the cop's eyes. His hand slid down his side where a holster should be. Instinct took over and Rachel fled.

She made it three yards, trying to put suits between her and the rollie pollie. She never heard the stunner. Her legs buckled, her back arched, electric fire singed her nerves. Rachel collapsed and writhed like a marionette jerked about by a mad puppeteer, then lay still, consciousness fleeing down a bright white tunnel.

AWARENESS RETURNED with a dull throb in Rachel's head and an ache in her knees. She opened her eyes to see a bug with way too many legs scurry across the concrete floor. For a moment, the bug looked as if it might head for her face, then thought better of it and dashed into a hole in the wall. The smell of urine infected the air and someone had vomited in a corner, days ago from the look of the dried mess. Rachel slowly uncurled from a fetal position to sit up and massage the ache from her knees. A security camera on the ceiling hissed on its mount, tracking her moves. She watched it, wondering if she could maneuver behind it and pop it from its mount. Government-issue electronics fetched a good price on the streets.

Heels clicked on linoleum. Rachel had landed in the tombs before and knew the drill. She slapped on her pathetic mask complete with a tear and a stifled sob. The cell door clanked open to reveal a uniform with a face as pockmarked as the concrete floor. He regarded Rachel for a moment, then spit.

"Let's go, kid," he said.

The uniform pushed her through a corridor as stark and white as a fainting spell. "Knock off the act," the uniform said. "No one believes you."

Rachel sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "What's going to happen to me?" she whined. "I want to go home!"

"Shut up," the uniform said.

Rachel resisted an urge to bite his leg. A stunner flapped in its holster at his side, within reach and as tempting as the mark in the plaza. She wanted the weapon, not because Rachel had any thoughts of escape, but simply because it was available. Rachel was a thief, the best in the city, and good enough to keep the other kids in food and clothes, the young ones even looking up to her as if she was some vid star. Sometimes it seemed as if years ago the idea of stealing entered her mind then got stuck there, repeating itself endlessly until it crowded out all other thoughts, in effect stealing her own brain. So she eyed the stunner, even began to lift her hand toward it, but caught herself in time.

They passed a group of rollie pollies slipping on their flak jackets and heading for a tour of duty, followed another corridor and entered a bare white interrogation room. Rachel flinched; she had prepared a routine for a cop, but instead found the gray-haired mark and his woman. The uniform kicked the door shut and leaned against the wall.

"Behave yourself," he said and pushed Rachel toward the couple.

"Come here," the woman said. "No one is going to hurt you."

Rachel approached slowly, keeping her eyes on her boots. When she stood before the couple, the woman took Rachel's chin in her hand and tilted her head back so she could see the girl's face. The woman had the plastic look of someone who had been through many rejuvenation treatments. The man looked more natural, jowls beginning to sag his face, sad eyes lost in deep sockets.

"Whatever were you going to do with my credit chips?" the man asked.

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. "I was hungry," she said between sniffles. "Maybe I could sell it or something."

The uniform laughed. "Don't let the little shit fool you. She's probably part of a ring. The smart ones can hack your account before you even know a chip is missing."

Rachel tucked her chin into her collarbone, began to bury her face in the woman's skirt, but hesitated for effect. "Go right ahead," the woman said and hugged Rachel close to her.

The man knelt beside her and said, "What happened to your face?" Her voice muffled by the skirt, Rachel said, "Always been that way." "Your parents can't afford skin replacement?" he asked.

Rachel said nothing, at first for effect, but as she inhaled the woman's mingled perfume and sweat, something caught in her throat. At her silence, the woman sighed and stroked Rachel's hair. "Do you live on the street?" she asked. Rachel nodded her head.

The man said, "Officer, my wife and I do not wish to press charges."

The uniform spat. "It's your funeral. The courts will just let her lose again, anyways."

Rachel pulled away from the woman, amazed at her good fortune, and forced a grin onto her tear-streaked face.

The woman said, "Would you like to come home with us? For a little while at least? We may be able to find a place for you."

Real fear sent Rachel several paces away from them. They didn't look like slavers, but you never could tell. When she found Little Gil in an alley, the boy had just escaped from two years as a sex toy.

"We won't hurt you, honestly," the woman said.

The man said, "It's not your fault — what you've become. Maybe it's time my family gave something back to the world."

Which made as much sense as a burp to Rachel, but her instincts seldom failed her and she guessed the couple were sincere.

"Thank you," she said. Life really was a kick in the butt.

MR. AND MRS. ARMSTRONG lived in one of the new developments on Carriage Hill. The house greeted them as they entered and Mozart piped through ceiling speakers. Rachel swore the walls were beige when she entered, but within seconds they transformed into a cheerful yellow.

"See," Mrs. Armstrong said. "House is glad you've come to stay with us."

Rachel gaped at the grand stairway, the hutch filled with crystal glimpsed in the dining room, enough furniture to sleep twice as many kids as lived in the warehouse. The house seemed to go on forever, square rooms and circular rooms and skylights and even a greenhouse that smelled of lilacs and wet earth.

The Armstrongs introduced Rachel to their son Bobby. Bobby was home from Dartmouth on spring break. To Rachel, he looked like one of those golden men in underwear ads. Bobby stared blankly at Rachel, then grinned and said, "How's it going, shitface?"

Before the Armstrongs could recover from their shock, Rachel said, "Fine, cocksucker."

"Rachel!" Mrs. Armstrong cried.

Bobby Armstrong threw his head back and laughed. "This is going to be great," he said.

"There is some language we use and some we don't," Mrs. Armstrong said. Distaste soured her face, then vanished in a sad smile. "What you must have lived through. Poor little girl."

Bobby said, "You want to give it a bath?"

His mother shot him a curdled-milk look.

Bobby knelt beside Rachel and examined her face. When his fingers brushed her skin they stoked a deep warmth in her belly as if he strummed music on her skin. She tried to look him in the eye, but focused on his belt buckle. "Street kid, right?" he asked.

Rachel nodded.

"Ever been to a VR alley?" he asked. "Ever play Sim Psycho?" At first Rachel thought he was making fun of her, but when she looked into his face she saw only curiosity. She shook her head. "I'll take you next time I go with the guys. Would you like that?"

"Yes, please," Rachel said. Bobby stood and grinned and as he walked away, Rachel gaped at the curve of his butt beneath his jeans and felt heat enflame her ruined face.

That night, the house bathed Rachel in warm water and bubbles and added a skin conditioner. Mrs. Armstrong gave her a nightgown decorated with happy turtles, left over from her daughter Claire. Claire was attending CalTech, Mrs. Armstrong explained, finishing her post-doc work in oceanography. Bobby excelled in math and even though he was only a freshman he already knew his field was economic modeling, something to do with artificial intelligence and stocks, which was all beyond her. "They're wonderful kids," she sighed.

By three in the morning, Rachel carted a pillow case full of silverware, palm terminals, credit chips and assorted gold knick-knacks through the

house. She paused in the hallway by the Armstrong's bedroom, listened, then eased the door open. Rabbit soft she crept to the dresser and opened a jewelry box and quietly sucked in her breath. She had never touched actual diamonds. Bracelets and pendants and earrings were arranged on velvet as if resting in a jeweler's display case. Rachel helped herself, slipped from the bedroom and headed downstairs. With a hand on the door, she hesitated, trying to figure out the alarm system.

"Can I help?" the house asked.

"Go to sleep," Rachel hissed, then said, "Turn off the alarm."

"I'm sorry. That command cannot be overwritten."

Rachel ignored the metallic voice and crept to the living room window. A full moon plated the neighborhood in silver. It was all so quiet, so still, far different from the insane background hum of sirens and traffic in the city. She thought she heard an owl, but couldn't be sure. Headlights suddenly knifed through the dark, sending Rachel a step back into the shadows. Two smart cars hummed up the driveway; even before the engines cut, she heard the laughter. Bobby Armstrong staggered from a sleek black car, tottered for a moment, then made way for a girl with golden hair. Two other boys leaped from the second car, laughing, using a beer can for a football. Oblivious to their friends, Bobby and the girl embraced, leaned against the car until he supported her weight and she scissored her legs around his waist. In the moonlight they looked like enchanted lovers from a fairy tale.

Rachel smirked as she watched; these happy dolts would last all of one day on the streets. Her smirk died, smothered in a sudden, immense longing, the memory of Bobby Armstrong's fingers on her face igniting within her like heat lightning. There were what — five or six years between them? The thought made no difference to Rachel; she wanted him the way she wanted the jewelry. She watched his hands stroke the girl's thighs, her own hands finding their way between her legs.

The beer can ricocheted off the car hood. Laughing, Bobby and the girl parted. Rachel dropped behind a couch as Bobby sauntered into the house. From across the room she could smell the beer and hemp. She watched him mount the stairs, heard the cars drive off, laughter trailing behind like exhaust. As she hid, Rachel began to rethink her plan. Actually she had no plan, just the never-ending urge to steal. But slowly, a new thought crept

into her mind, a vague plan. Maybe this was too good to blow with a quick strike. If she stayed a while and played good girl, who knew what real riches she might find? She sat on the proverbial gold mine, enough to keep the kids in high style, maybe enough to break the grind of hunting money and food, for a while at least.

Or maybe she just wanted to stay for Bobby. Loathing welled up within her and ambushed her mind. Dumb bitch. Only the family mattered. Besides, who could want her with a face from a nightmare?

Still, the plan made sense. With a struggle, Rachel replaced most of her loot, except for a shiny diamond pendant thing. She found a phone and dialed Aspen's current stolen cell phone number. The girl appeared bleary-eyed in the viewer, then gaped. "Where are you? Are you all right?"

"Better than ever, my missy missy." Rachel said. She explained her situation and her plan. "Give me a few days and we'll clean this place out."

Aspen looked unconvinced. "Maybe we can get by for a few days without you," she said.

"You be boss lady," Rachel said. "How's Little Gil?"

"Miserable," Aspen said. "He's so afraid the rollie pollies will hack your brain."

"Tell him not to worry," Rachel said. "Tell him Rachel's bringing him milk and honey. Hug him for me. And tell Max to stand guard. Never know what slime is roaming the streets."

Aspen's face went grim. "Max is feeling mighty low right now. You told him to protect us and — know it now, I guess. Roy Boyd snuck out. He ain't come back."

Rachel's gut turned hollow. How old was Roy Boyd — nine maybe with blond locks and cherub face. Good pickings for slavers, the kind of boy they could sell real easy to grimy rich guys.

"Everybody's real nervous," Aspen said. "They're afraid of what will happen if you don't come back. Where's the eats coming from. Where's...."

"You tell them about the plan," Rachel snapped. "You tell them to stay put. I never let any of you down before. Right? You tell them to remember that."

"Yessem mam," Aspen said. "Don't get hurt."

"Sleep tight, missy missy," Rachel said. She cut the connection and crept upstairs to her bed beneath a canopy of silk, but sleep eluded her. She

remembered playing five card stud with Roy Boyd and his grin exploding across his face like fireworks. Come home, Roy Boyd, please. But she did not expect to see the boy again. Too many others had strayed and been swallowed up by the streets. Rachel rarely thought about the future; surviving the present took all her heart. But the past wrote itself into her brain like lessons carved into granite. Good-bye, Roy Boyd.

IN THE MORNING, Rachel ate scrambled eggs and waffles and scones. Mrs. Armstrong watched her, smiling all the while as if she had just told the most wonderful story. The dining nook overlooked a small patio and a path leading to a stream and a pine forest beyond. Cardinals pecked at seeds stuck in a honey cone and squirrels played tag in the redbuds. Rachel watched a monarch flutter among the roses and remembered the time she was so hungry she ate a butterfly. That was long ago, before she learned her trade, when some nights the kids battled feral dogs in the alleys over scraps of garbage.

After breakfast, Mr. Armstrong took Rachel by the hand and led her to a gazebo overlooking the stream. Bobby appeared at the side of the house and drove away in a two-seater. Rachel wondered what he would look like in his underwear, remembered how his hands stroked the girl's thighs.

"He's a good kid," Mr. Armstrong said, catching her gaze at his son. "Both our children are. They have good futures. We made sure of that." Mr. Armstrong sighed and leaned back on his bench. Rachel swung on a swing chair and dangled her new shoes above the red wood. "I don't envy them the world they have to live in," Mr. Armstrong said. "It's crazy, just crazy. Unless you can afford the best modifications for your kids they have no chance to compete. Claire's a pure gene mod, but by the time Bobby reached high school we had to augment him with a co-processor. Where will it end?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and studied Rachel. "That's why you're in the state you're in," he said. "If you have the money, your kids thrive. If you don't...." He held his hands out, palms up as if displaying the answer. "What's your first memory?" he asked.

The question took Rachel by surprise. She thought about it, finally

conjured up an image of Mr. Clancy. "I don't think he was my father," she said. "I think he was what they call a foster parent."

"Was he nice?" Mr. Armstrong asked.

"He touched me here," she answered, dropping her hand to her crotch. "He smelled bad."

Mr. Armstrong looked as if he had been kicked. "What happened?"

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. "These kids were boosting vids from a loading dock. I saw them and saw rollie pollies coming and I warned them and ran with them. Guess I've been with them since then."

Mr. Armstrong shook his head in disbelief. "You kids live on your own? How do you survive?"

Rachel shrugged her shoulders, not sure how truthful she should be. She settled on, "The older kids bring us food and money."

With a sad nod of his head, Mr. Armstrong said, "I see. It's just so damned unfair. It's not your fault your parents were poor. And the thing of it is, there's no chance for any of you to catch up. How can you compete with a kid engineered to an IQ of 175? It's getting worse every day. You're damned here on Earth."

Rachel nodded sagely but had no idea what the man was talking about.

"Well for you, at any rate, that will change a bit. My wife and I have talked this over. We are very well connected. We want to fix your face."

Rachel was sure she had misunderstood him. Fix her? How?

"Well, say something," the man said and grinned.

Rachel turned away from him, felt her cheeks flush, suddenly unwilling to have anyone see her damaged face. Later, she went to her bedroom and her body, as if taking on a life of its own, took her to the mirror. A gargoyle stared back at her. She had lied to the Armstrongs, although she couldn't say why. Clancy had ruined her face, burned it with acid when she tried to fight him off. She examined the scars, touched them, stretched the skin to see what it might look like if the Armstrongs fixed her. Rachel had no memory of a normal face. After a while, her scars became an asset — nobody wanted her, people treated her like a plague carrier and left her alone, pretended she didn't exist. Which was how she learned her trade and survived. Her very ugliness made her invisible.

Rachel pictured herself pretty like Aspen. She pictured a boy like

Bobby Armstrong looking at her and seeing her and liking what he saw and taking her in his arms, reaching for her thighs.

A sudden chill shuddered its way through Rachel. She hugged herself and turned from the mirror. She could not let herself want a life like that. She had her kids to think about. Nothing else mattered.

But still...?

THE OLD NEED sent Rachel on the prowl that night. She fought the impulse to take everything and run, decorate herself with diamonds and stuff her pockets with the cash money she knew must be secreted somewhere in the house. No, have patience, remember the plan. But she had to take something. She found an antique fountain pen in a roll-top desk. Greasy Jack the fence was always going on about how people paid big money for worthless old junk if you called it an antique. Rachel grabbed the pen and headed upstairs.

Outside Bobby Armstrong's door, Rachel hesitated. The closed door beckoned like the entrance to a cave hiding treasure. Rachel had no idea if Bobby was home, but trusted her stealth. Besides, maybe she'd get a glimpse of the boy in his underwear, even naked. With a mischievous grin, Rachel eased open the door.

The bed across the room was empty. She tiptoed in, froze when she glimpsed a cold blue light in an alcove to her right. She looked, her heart thumped against her ribs.

Bobby sprawled in a recliner, his face turned garish in the light of a palm terminal in his hand, shining upward and casting demonic shadows. His eyes were wide open, looked straight at Rachel, but saw nothing in the room. His jaw hung slack and drool flecked his chin. A thin lead stretched from the back of his head to the terminal.

Channel surfing, Rachel thought. She shuddered and stepped backward. Rachel lived in a world fueled by drugs. No price was too high for the promise of escape. Joy Bang and Delirium and Mex and Supercoke and a new one every week rushed like a river through the streets and more people than she could count got swept up in that torrent, swept to their deaths. Rachel had two rules for her kids — no one squeals and no one goes near drugs. Anyone tempted by the easy money got kicked out on their ass.

She made that rule the day the rollie pollies fished Joey Barnes from the river, a wad of bills in one pocket, a syringe in the other. Joey had been eight years old.

To Rachel, channel surfing was just another drug. She could barely read, wouldn't know an icon from a coffee cup, but she understood the principle. Kids like Bobby Armstrong, the ones augmented with co-processors, could have jacks surgically implanted and from there connect directly into the Net. What they did in their reveries, Rachel couldn't guess. But once jacked in, they were hooked no differently than the Joy Bang addict. And like the addict, if a channel surfer lost their fix, they went mad and screamed and tore their own flesh. Only drug addicts recovered. Channel surfers just withdrew into ruined and empty hulks, forever grieving their lost electronic world.

Rachel turned away from Bobby Armstrong and hurried to her room.

She slept little that night, sitting in her bed beneath the silk canopy, listening to the night sounds — an owl hooting outside, walls settling, pipes creaking. It was so easy to be fooled by the skylights and the clean tablecloths and the Armstrongs' generosity and Bobby's good looks and all the while miss the sense of something gone terribly wrong in their lives. In his own way, Bobby ran from his demons just as Rachel's family ran from the street. The thought, oddly, cheered Rachel. No golden God, Bobby was flawed and perhaps — just perhaps — within her reach.

She imagined herself beautiful and Bobby Armstrong taking her in his arms and giving her presents of his own free will. A yearning for such a life swept through Rachel, a yearning as strong as her need to steal. She could get used to life in a bed like this. With that thought, she finally fell asleep.

The next morning, Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong went out. Rachel took the diamond pendant thing and the antique pen and headed into the pines behind the house. The forest was actually a tiny nature preserve leading to a commons. From there, she cut across the development to the rendezvous point, the tube station on Fredricksburg Avenue. Little Gil saw her first, threw himself into her arms. Rachel swung him around, then hugged Aspen.

"Hey, missy missy."

"Hey you," Aspen said.

Little Gil yanked her arm. "Come home," he pleaded.

"Not now," she said. "There's more milk and honey for the taking." Aspen cocked her head and frowned. "You sure you knows the score?"

"Did I ever fuck up?"

"Never," said Aspen.

"No way," said Little Gil.

Rachel glanced over her shoulder, waited for a suit to pass, then stuffed the pendant and the pen into Aspen's hand. The girl's eyes formed discs. "We've never never never had this much!"

"And there's more. I've got to get back. Take this to Greasy Jack and don't let him sucker you. But first show this stuff to the family. Make them understand there's more where this came from. Take care missy missy."

She pulled away from Little Gil and was about to leave, but instead asked, "Roy Boyd?"

"Gone," Aspen said.

Rachel forced back a shudder and turned to race toward the development. She heard Little Gil cry out and Aspen call, "They touch you and we'll kill 'em. Eat their eyeballs for dinner!"

"No worry, no pain," Rachel called to them.

When she forded the stream and started up the incline to the house, she spied Bobby sitting on the patio, grinning at her. "Good morning, shitface," he said.

"Morning, cocksucker," she said.

"Sit and have a beer with me."

"Sure," she said, and accepted a frosted stein. Bobby watched her over the rim of his stein, his gaze flooding her body with warmth.

"You were in my room last night," he said.

Rachel flinched, then willed herself impassive, judged the distance to the drive and escape.

"No point in lying," he said. "House told me. House watches everything you do."

She sat motionless, but defeat slumped her soul. No new face, no milk and honey, no Bobby.

Bobby laughed. "My parents don't know. I programmed House to watch you. My poor parents. They mean well. They wouldn't snoop on

you. Probably think it wouldn't be good for your self-esteem or something." He swallowed a gulp and leaned forward. "So I guess we have a little stalemate here. Let's make a deal."

"What kind of deal?" Rachel asked.

"You keep your mouth shut and I keep my mouth shut. We both win. Deal?"

"Deal," she said, still planning her escape.

Bobby leaned back and took a drink, wiped foam from his lips with his tongue.

"Is it better than Joy Bang?" she asked.

He smirked and shook his head. "You are the little bitch, aren't you? There's no comparison. None at all."

"What do you do when you're hooked up?" She craned her neck to see if she could spot the jack, but his blonde hair hid any trace.

"Listen," he said. Bobby's eyes focused on something far beyond Rachel. "It's like a symphony or something, like all the people on the Net are singing to each other, voices, thousands of voices all singing to each other and they all make up this one great mind. When you're jacked, you're part of it. It floats you away and all this — this shit we call life doesn't matter anymore. You don't matter because you're part of it."

"Sounds like Joy Bang," she said.

Bobby focused on her and smiled. "Maybe it is. But that's not why we do it. Afterward, you know things."

She waited for him to continue, but he just went on smiling. "What kind of things?" she asked.

"Things," he said. "All kinds." He leaned forward, his eyes large and blazing. "That stupid little voice in your head isn't your mind at all. It's just the tiny part you're aware off. Beneath the surface, that's where all the really important stuff happens. And when you're jacked, it's like tons of information goes straight into your brain where you can't see it just like everything around us is going straight into our brain right now, only we aren't aware of the creatures in that forest or the air pressure or the subtle body language passing between us because we're concentrating on each other. But our minds take it all in. Same way on the Net. Maybe the rush is like Joy Bang, but underneath it all, the wealth of the Net is zooming straight into our subconscious."

Rachel listened and tried to make sense of his monologue. "What kind of things?" she asked again.

"Like wealth," he said. "People flounder around picking stocks like it's some kind of science. But all this financial information goes into your brain and out comes the pattern. You see the pattern and you know what to buy. You meet somebody at a party and then wham! It hits you. Everything about this guy is already in your head — his gene mods, his grades, what he likes in sex, his whole medical history, everything. When you've got that, you've got power over the guy. Politics! Way before anyone has a clue who's going to get elected, you know because you're following all the patterns without even knowing it. Think about it. You know who to give money to, which politician to buy. And you're first in line at the trough. It's incredible!"

Rachel glimpsed his meaning, indeed saw the sense beneath his words, even though the details remained fuzzy.

A sly grin puckered Bobby's mouth. "And I haven't even told you about the sex. Search out anybody you like and — well, it leaves Joy Bang in the dust." Bobby finished his beer, slammed the stein onto the patio table, and pushed his chair back. "Got to be going, shitface. You have a real nice day. And don't forget our deal."

He slapped her on the back and headed for the house. "Bobby," she called after him. "Do you think I could be pretty?"

Bobby smiled and for a moment the sun angled across his face and Rachel melted inside. "Yeah, they told me they're taking you in for surgery," he said. He cocked his head and studied her and said, "Yeah. I can see it. You will be drop-dead gorgeous."

She watched him leave in his sports car, feeling stunned and confused and then terrified.

At first she had no idea what demons drove her, but they forced her into the house. Rachel prowled the place, fingers caressing silverware and antiques and the treasure trove in the jewelry box in the Armstrongs' bedroom. She needed to steal, needed to steal everything. Stealing was best — the old comfortable safe way of earning a living for her kids. If she stopped stealing, she could stay. She would be drop-dead gorgeous. And then who would lead her kids?

Rachel loaded her pockets with rings and bracelets, raided Bobby's

room and found cash money in his desk. She turned to flee, but hesitated. She tasted salt on her lips and with a start realized tears rolled down her cheeks. Rachel slumped in the recliner and let it mold itself to her thin body, embracing her like a plastic hug. By late afternoon, her sobbing ended and in the resulting calm she saw the solution. She would steal a future for them and herself, only her booty couldn't be stuffed into her pockets or tied up in a pillow case. It sailed on electric winds in a place she could not touch, but which nonetheless existed and thus could be robbed. It was the same place where she could become one with Bobby.

The Armstrongs came home that night to find Rachel in the den, sobbing, her face buried in a pillow. She ran to them and hugged Mr. Armstrong and cried into his belt. At last, the two adults calmed her hysteria and sat with her on the couch. Mrs. Armstrong stroked Rachel's hair and said, "What is it, child?"

"I don't care about my face," Rachel blubbered. "I don't want you to fix it!"

The Armstrongs, puzzled, calmed her again. "Why won't you let us help you?" Mr. Armstrong said.

"I listened to what you told me," Rachel whimpered. "You're right. It doesn't matter what I look like. I can't be like you. I'm just normal. I'll never be anything!"

"There, there," Mrs. Armstrong said. She glanced at her husband who did his best to hide his own moist eyes.

"Rachel," he said. "Listen to me. It's true there's nothing that can be done about your genetic makeup. But there are other ways. Augmentations. Remember what I told you about our son?"

Rachel nodded. "The co — co...."

"Co-processor," Mr. Armstrong said. "Perhaps a modification like that is possible."

Rachel looked up at him and wiped the grime from her face. "I just want to be like you," she said. "I don't want to go back to the streets."

Mrs. Armstrong smiled. "That will never happen, child. We can at least save you."

Rachel hugged the woman and rubbed her eyes with her knuckles.

She waited up late that night until Bobby, smelling of beer and weed, staggered into the house. He flinched when she stepped in front of him, then rearranged his face into a smirk. "Hey, shitface," he said.

"I've been caught before. The only bad thing that will happen to me is getting kicked out of this house. But if you get caught they'll take away that socket and you won't have your fix."

Bobby did his best to grin, but his mouth faltered. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what happens when a channel surfer gets cut off. You want to be a zombie?"

"I ought to break your stupid neck," he snapped and almost lunged for her.

"New deal," she said. "Your parents said they'd get me a co-processor. I keep my mouth shut if you help me get my own jack."

He gaped at her, suddenly laughed. "Is this a joke?"

Rachel shook her head.

"I won't be blackmailed by you," he said.

"Yes you will," she said.

He considered her demands, finally sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I'm going to bed," he said.

"And when I'm hooked up," she said. "You'll come to me sometimes and make love to me."

Bobby froze on the steps, kept his back to her, then without a word climbed to his bedroom.

Rachel sat on the couch before her rubbery legs gave out. Terror shuddered its way through her thin body, terror at her plan, fear of some terrible retribution. Mostly she trembled at the thought of what she was about to become, everything she would lose.

Ah, but everything she'd gain!

WHEN SHE WAS ready, Rachel left the Armstrongs' house, carrying a sack of loot. She took the tube into the city and entered the warehouse.

Little Gil spotted her first, swung from his perch in the pipes and ran to her and threw himself into her arms. Max and Cinnamon and Rough Neck followed, and Aspen hugged her best friend as if afraid to let her go and risk losing Rachel again.

"Hey, missy, missy," Rachel said.

"Hey you," Aspen said.

The next day, the kids gathered around her in the warehouse and there on a dais made from old pallets, Rachel sat in a high-backed wooden chair, wearing one of Mrs. Armstrong's diamond necklaces. Little Gil and Aspen decorated her hair with dandelions and lilies. For a moment, Rachel fingered the palm terminal. She still had time to back out.

Instead, she said, "This will take some time. I have to learn how to use it. But soon we will have all the milk and honey anybody could ever want."

Rachel inserted the lead into the jack at the base of her skull. At first there was nothing. Then, slowly, the voices formed out of random static, thousands of them, a symphony of lives all connected in one massive song. Rachel closed her eyes and let her mind join the song, the music of her future. Like Bobby, she would soon know things, the patterns to lead her kids from the streets. And she would search out Bobby Armstrong and at last they would become one, lovers entwined on an electric bed. ☺



"I'm sorry, Iverson—only senior partners are winged."

Harvey Jacobs is the author of several witty novels, including Beautiful Soup, American Golliath, and The Juror. He says he's working on a new one but won't say much about it for fear of side effects. He describes this new tale as "a story with porpoise, in tune with today's inquiring minds."

Fish Story

By Harvey Jacobs

BOB AKER KNEW HE WAS behaving like an idiot but when his goldfish, Midas, passed on, he felt a real sense of loss. The fish was the only possession he insisted on keeping when his wife divorced him besides his clothes, laptop, kitchen utensils, culinary appliances and his collection of cookbooks. He didn't care about anything else and gladly signed away his rights to the myriad of objects he suddenly saw as so much junk. He did insist on keeping their Greenwich Village apartment and wrote his ex a huge check for half its value. She wanted to move to the Hamptons anyhow.

When the apartment was emptied out by her storm troopers, it transformed from a cramped two-bedroom flat to huge space. Bob bought a futon, a pillow, some sheets and a blanket and a small bureau for his clothes. He also bought a wicker stand for the goldfish bowl. With what money he had left after his wife cleaned him out, he indulged himself by remodeling the kitchen. Bob's only hobbies were cooking and eating. Good food gave him inner peace. To nosh was to meditate.

One reason for the divorce was the indisputable fact that his gourmet meditations made him fat. His wife, on the other hand, was obsessed with keeping herself lithe and trim. Half the living room, now liberated, once held her exercise machines. Since Bob quit his job as a financial analyst and became an ardent day trader, doing very well in that belly-wrenching profession, he found strength in patience and solace in the kitchen. She had complained about his expanding girth to the point where taking meals together was an abomination. She called him Cholesterol Man. She criticized every spoonful of food that vanished between his generous lips. She even attacked his goldfish, accusing Bob of overfeeding lonely Midas who had doubled in size within a few months. The fish had grown lethargic, hardly moved except to forage for its powdery rations. It floated near the bottom of its bowl like a wounded submarine. In an odd sense, Bob saw Midas as a metaphor for the stock market, animated gold, heavy with success, always threatening to implode or explode, teasing oxygen out of water, producing not much more than its own stringy shit, weirdly smug inside its glass shell.

Bob meant to put his fish on a diet and even considered shedding a few dozen pounds himself. But watching Midas watch him indulge in one of his feasts, Bob felt pangs of guilt and always went to shake a few more crumbs into the fish bowl.

Besides some casual relationships in Bob's neighborhood, storekeepers and the like, he was virtually without friends or close family. His departed spouse got custody of the people they'd met as a couple and Bob didn't particularly miss any of them. Midas was his only confidante and he felt obliged to share the pleasures of good eating with his loyal companion. Midas returned Bob's largesse with fish affection. Bob felt warmth emanating from Midas's bowl. If Bob put his face close to the glass, Midas would swim toward his nose and confront him face to face. For the moment, that was bonding enough. Midas required no walking, no trips to the vet, no sour-smelling litter box. He was the perfect pet.

When Bob found Midas drifting belly up one awful morning, he whispered a prayer and, thinking Egyptian, offered up a few grains of fish food to sustain Midas on the way to eternity. Since his pet was dead, the food drifted past its mouth and settled among the gravel at the bottom of its world. Bob faced facts and though he felt mournful and deserted,

reminded of mortality, he quickly scooped up Midas's golden remains with a ladle and slipped the rigid corpse into an empty horse radish jar. He screwed on the jar's cap, wrapped the glass coffin in a plastic bag and took it to Washington Square Park.

There he buried his fish near the great Arch, said another farewell, and went to buy a replacement.

Bob realized that excessive grief was as unhealthy as enforced loneliness. He liked his solitude but hated eating alone. The tiny presence of a goldfish made an enormous difference in his sparse domestic environment. While Bob had qualms about finding a substitute for Midas so quickly, he decided to suspend lament and cater to his own urgent need to fill the deserted bowl with something alive and moderately responsive.

Bob walked briskly along West 4th Street, then turned south on the Avenue of the Americas to Bleeker Street. His destination was a few buildings in from the corner, an old tenement that once housed a pizza parlor on the ground floor and Berman's Petropolis a flight upstairs. Bob anticipated a slice of hot pizza thick with cheese and mushrooms to ease his bereavement, but when he found the building he saw that the pizza joint was boarded up and that the apartments above Petropolis were empty with white crosses painted across their windows. Like so many buildings in the Village, this one was slated for demolition and gentrification.

Petropolis's large front window was covered with sheet metal, plastered with posters for movies and off-off-Broadway shows. To Bob's surprise, the pet store was still doing business according to a cardboard sign tacked to the wooden door that read: BERMAN'S PETROPOLIS FINAL SALE...40% OFF! HURRY! (ONE FLIGHT UP TO BIG BAR-GAINS)

Bob let out a long sigh. Everything was in flux. Nothing stayed in place for very long anymore. Nothing and nobody. He climbed the ancient staircase and knocked at Petropolis's entrance. From previous dealings with Berman — he'd bought Midas there and went back twice a year for Midas's provisions — he knew the little man was obviously paranoid. Berman's metal door was kept locked and bolted. PROTECTED BY labels warned off thieves and thugs. A large black alarm box was riveted to the ceiling above the barred transom.

The door's bell button dangled useless from a corroded wire as it had

for years. Knocking was the only way to catch Berman's nervous attention. Eventually he would shuffle across his loft, peer through a peephole, trip locks, slide bolts and turn the knob.

This time it took five knockings to rouse Berman, who finally appeared, shaking off webs from a nap, rubbing red eyes, coughing and yawning. "You? Long time no see," Berman said. "Don't stand there. That's exactly what muggers like. They sneak up behind you and bash in your brains. For what? A few lousy bucks? The only thing cheap these days is life. And what I got on sale."

Bob hurried inside while Berman secured the premises. He breathed in the familiar smell of Berman's menagerie, a hot, musky mix of fur, feathers, scales, drippings and droppings. Actually, the smell wasn't unpleasant. Not Chanel #5, but not terrible — bearable, organic, even a little exciting. The mingled odors, parakeets to kittens, monkeys to puppies, gerbils to turtles, lizards to snakes fused into a turgid wind that carried memories of chirping, growling, mewing, bubbling.

"I didn't recognize you. You put on a few tons, heh?" Berman said. "How's your fish?"

"Dead," Bob said.

"They do that," Berman said. "Sorry. How's your missus?"

"Forget about her."

"Again, sorry. My condolences."

With the front window sealed, the only light came from a few fluorescent wands. Bob looked around through the eerie glow and saw that Petropolis was largely depleted of its usual population. The creatures that were left looked limp and mangy like old produce in a fruit market. There were many empty cages hanging from the ceiling and naked shelves behind vacant counters. Obviously Berman had his walking papers from a greedy landlord. Petropolis was in its sad last hours. Still, there were enough goldfish to choose from. They swam in tanks adjacent to the exotic tropicals.

Bob considered upgrading to Siamese or Angels but remembered that fancy fishes needed filters, pumps, heaters, plants, elaborate tanks, special foods. He knew from experience that their life span was inversely proportionate to their beauty. No, he'd stick with a good old dependable goldfish that could take New York tap water in stride.

"I see you're closing shop," Bob said.

"It's not hard to see. Why else is everything in the store forty percent off? Because I went crazy! They're kicking me out, the bastards. And there's no place to go. So I got to get rid of the whole works. They're pushing me out on the sidewalk. I got a court order. I can stay three months. But already they try to intimidate me. They disconnect my electric. They cut off my pipes. I got to shlep water from the Greek luncheonette. They ripped out my telephone lines. Hooray for the millennium."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Berman," Bob said. "I always enjoy coming up here."

"That's how it goes," Berman said. "How can I help you? You want a dozen white mice? Name it. What? Everything is a steal."

"I want another goldfish. A healthy one. Not too fat."

"That's it? A goldfish? Why not take them all?"

"One is plenty."

"A few boxes of food? For what it cost me."

"I have enough left over."

"I like a big spender," Berman said. "Go over and pick a goldfish. I'll pull it out for you."

Bob went to the fish wall and browsed the goldfish tank. His choice was easy. One fish among the swirl looked like an especially hearty specimen. It had good color, good spirit, good prospects. "That one."

"Just a minute. I'll get a bag."

"Do you happen to have a jar? I hate carrying around a fish in a bag of water."

"One goldfish forty percent off and you want a jar? How about a champagne bottle? Maybe gift wrapping?" Berman headed for the back of the store.

Bob wandered around exploring Petropolis's remaining inhabitants. He wondered what would become of Berman's sorry leftovers. There were always bottom fishers who snapped up anything cheap enough. And women who couldn't resist a runt of the litter.

Berman would probably find customers for most of the pets. Maybe some store would buy the rest of the miserable collection. He poked his finger at a cat sitting on some newspapers in a wire mesh cage. It wasn't

a kitten, it wasn't full grown. "Definitely a hard sell," Bob said, "but you might get lucky." The cat rolled over and let Bob scratch its belly.

Bob continued his browsing, feeling more and more depressed. He was impatient to get out of there, get home, get his new fish settled, and either fix himself a snack, maybe an avocado stuffed with tuna, or go over to the White Horse Tavern for a cheeseburger and a beer. He caught a look at himself in a wall mirror behind a budgie cage looking pasty and pale in that thin synthetic flicker. Bob watched the one last bird, a faded blue looser with a bent beak, flap riddled wings that reminded him of World War I fighter planes after a tough skirmish. "Mr. Berman?" he yelled. "I have a busy day. Could we finish our business please? I don't mean to rush you, but...." Bob got no answer. He figured that Berman was taking a piss or finishing off a sandwich. Who could tell with that sullen man? He was probably half senile, he might have forgotten the whole transaction.

Bob navigated past tables, boxes, and vacant cases following Berman's path to wherever it was he kept his supplies and probably a Mosler Safe with six combination locks. Petropolis was most likely Berman's home as well as his store. He must have gotten himself a bed and a hot plate and holed up there for half a century. "Berman? Can you hear me? I can't just hang around."

Bob turned an unexpected corner, went down a corridor, and found Berman's secret nest. His suspicions were correct. There was a desk, a safe, a hot plate, a cabinet stuffed with clothes and a cot with a rusty frame. Berman was lying on the floor holding a calculator. Water spilled from a Petropolis carry bag made a puddle near Berman's head. Bob knew immediately that Berman was dead. He felt for a pulse and tried CPR but it was no use. No more Midas, no more Berman. A very bad day. Bob found a telephone on Berman's desk under a pile of catalogs. All it could get was a dismal buzz. He remembered what Berman said about the landlord's campaign to evict him. Bob could have kicked himself for leaving his cellular back home. He never went anyplace without it. But coping with his dead fish upset even entrenched habits.

Bob took time to cover Berman's body with a blanket, then went to get help. He got as far as the defended outer door. The locks and bolts were secure. He went back to find Berman's keys, riffling through a multitude of pockets in his pants, vest, and shirt, but found nothing but a wallet and

a Swiss Army knife. Bob felt the clutch of understandable anxiety. "God knows where this nut case hides his keys," Bob said to Berman's corpse. "You got me locked in this pig sty. No phone. No water. Sometimes no electric." What about customers? Did Berman have any customers left?

After an hour of banging against the metal plates that closed off Petropolis's front window, after screaming for attention at what seemed like air vents, after looking for some possible exit from his curious predicament, Bob accepted that he had a problem. Best case scenario, some loyal patron would come up the stairs and *knock knock knock*. But when? Worst case, no customers would come calling and Berman still had three months to clear out. Three months? Alone with a dead body and a bunch of comatose creatures dreaming of life in a fantasy forest long since leveled by chain saws. They must have quit hoping for loving masters and happy homes when they picked up Berman's negative vibrations. Animals and birds know about things. They have their ways. "The good news is that nothing up here is big enough to eat me," Bob said to a garden snake. "No lions or tigers. No pit bulls roaming around." The thought reminded Bob of his own appetite. He hadn't even had breakfast.

Bob quit his search for Berman's key chain and went foraging for food. He found sacks of litter, a few cans of cat food, a box of Purina Dog Chow, a jar marked BLOOD WORMS, and one bag that held a single serving of organic corn flakes. Not even a can of coffee or a tea bag. At least there was water in the fish tanks. Not Evian but potable. Bob sat on the floor eating the dry corn flakes, considering his situation. Except for split-second decisions about the swing of the market, Bob had a way of taking forever to make his moves. He grinned thinking about his wife's ballooning rage when he lingered over the tomato bin at the market, choosing his tomatoes like a diamond merchant picking gems. And here he was, facing up to his problems, weighing his options like he weighed a bunch of seedless grapes.

The lights flared and went out. Bob was sealed in a black cube. Berman said the landlord was taunting him by playing mind games with the electric. Either that or the bill was ten years past due. Listening to Berman was like listening to Alan Greenspan talk about no inflation. Fact and fiction fused to affliction.

Even though he'd quit smoking after his divorce, largely to spite his

wife by adding a few years to his life, Bob still carried the Dunhill lighter he'd bought when puts and calls on e-Trade made him \$32,000 in three hours. It was his talisman, his charm, a reminder of his worth. Bob reached for the lighter and flicked it on. The flame burned bright. He stood up and headed back to Berman's quarters. There had to be candles someplace. If the plug had been pulled, Berman must have prepared for future blackouts.

Sure enough, a box of votive candles waited for emergencies on top of the safe. Soon Petropolis was illuminated with comforting beams, though the candles threw ominous shadows. Bob fell asleep on Berman's cot. He was wakened when the fluorescents came back on. Berman had been telling the truth, the landlord was a gamesman. Bob rushed around extinguishing the candles, blowing into each glass of waxy hot soup. By then he was ravenous.

"There is no other solution," Bob thought to himself. "None but to endure this indignity with as much grace as possible. I must live off the land like a hunter gatherer." He went back into the body of the store and addressed his fellow captives. "I have nothing against any of you," he said. "Like you, I'm a prisoner against my will. It isn't my fault that fate formed my atoms into a *Homo sapiens* instead of a frog. Luck of the draw. And like you I must eat. But there is nothing else to eat but you guys. I will not swallow cat food or worms. Oh, I hear you. No, devouring Mr. Berman is out of the question. I believe in lines of no crossing. This isn't the Donner Pass. I am no Jeffrey Dahmer. So don't even think it. You're all doomed anyhow. At least this way you can know that your protein-rich carcasses will be used to good purpose.

"I respect you all. My fish gave me solace during very hard times. I am not a malicious man. But you are potentially nutritious and delicious as they say in commercials. So let's all agree to make the best of things. Whatever he is, Bob Aker is a helluva chef. He'll bring out your best. And that's a kind of immortality." Bob's inspired oration was met with various sounds of approval. He bowed, laughing to himself to prove he wasn't getting as crazy as Berman.

It was time for making choices. Bob went to the bank of fish tanks and peered into liquid domains. The fish he'd selected to buy was the only one with real substance.

But that was to be Midas's heir. He wasn't going to broil it unless all else failed.

To die in one of Berman's dirty pans without wine, butter and lemon for an epitaph was unthinkable. Still, the others, taken together, would only make a few mouthfuls. Bob had an epiphany. He cupped his hands and succeeded in isolating his chosen goldfish, lifted it gently from its habitat, and placed it in an otherwise empty tank. Then he poured the remaining fish into the goldfish tank. Guppies to tetras, the exotics were mixed with the generic golds. Then Bob stepped back and let nature take its course. His vision was clear. The fish would work things out among themselves. They would swallow one another until only one fish remained triumphant. It would be like those epic wars on cable television.

A single survivor would emerge, bloated in victory. A fish that would be chubby enough to make a decent meal was worth the waiting. Appetite increases with anticipation. As a respected gourmet, Bob knew very well that anticipation is the ultimate secret ingredient, the best spice of all.

For twenty hours, Bob watched an incredible show. There were no station breaks, no interruptions. The plot was basic enough, without complications or subtleties. There was suspense, horror, even a little humor and beauty. Underwater enemies, some born to kill, others forced to carnage, twisted, dived, hid behind plants that waved in the roiled water, darted suddenly, played possum, jumped, circled, pounced. The laughs came when one fish would indulge in a moment of satisfaction after chewing up a fin or tail. In that time of contentment, another fish would sense an advantage and inflict terrible punishment. Some fish bled red, others just dissolved into death. Bob was hypnotized by the spectacle and never noticed time passing.

At long last only one fish was left. Ironically, it was one of the goldfish that had hugged the tank's glass wall and inherited bits and pieces of former associates as they drifted by its welcoming face. Its first and last joust was with another goldfish surprised when its passive kin turned to a furious cannibal. From attending countless buffet dinners, Bob knew about feeding frenzies.

Before taking the next step, Bob went to empty his bladder. But where was Berman's facility and what good was a toilet without water to flush? Behind the office, Bob found what passed for a bathroom. A cactus plant

rested on the closed toilet seat. Ingenious Berman had built himself a large litter box. Thank God, he must have cleaned it out just before Bob came to Petropolis. It looked like a sandbox. Bob had a giddy feeling using it; whirlwinds of memory brought him back to defunct playgrounds where apartment houses now stood. He zipped up and went back into the store.

Bob lifted the winning gladiator goldfish out of the wet coliseum and saw its raw mouth open and close, gasping a series of *why me's*. It was a pity that goldfish wouldn't translate into sushi. It had to be changed by fire to be marginally edible. Without butter for the pan Bob accepted that his dinner would shrivel to the size of a sardine.

He had another sensible thought. He wished his wife could see his mind work. He put dinner on hold, took the expiring fish and dropped it into the cage where the white mice lived. This time he didn't wait around for the mouse feast. He found an old newspaper and read an article about the plot to get rid of Princess Diana. *Was a tunnel under Paris another Tower of London?* the author asked rhetorically and Bob found himself wondering, is every accident a conspiracy? Berman would say *sure, probably*.

Bob dozed again and dreamed about time. Was it night or day? His watch gave him the hour and minute but no more information. He woke without a clue to the answer.

There was no way to tell. What he did know was that he was hot and thirsty. He went to the fish tank where battle had been done, made a face, took a breath, then dipped his head into rusty brownish water that had to contain some nutrients. It didn't taste all that bad. Then he went to check on the mice. Sure enough, the goldfish was history and the mice fatter and more playful. Bob thought about boiling up the batch of rodents, a revolting prospect. And, like the fish, even twelve mice would be the equivalent of an *hors d'oeuvre*. He needed a main course, not an appetizer.

Bob wrapped the Diana newspaper around his hands, making a paper glove, then went to fetch the last snake in Petropolis. The garter gave him no trouble; it hung like a spent rubberband. But when he dropped his serpent in with the mice, the snake came alert, began to coil and uncoil, slithered around, then grabbed a mouse by a hind leg. Bob waited until the reptile jaws expanded into a version of the Paris tunnel that folded around the dark-starred princess and sucked in the struggling squeaker. It was not a pleasant sight or a quick death. But Bob could see the snake fatten with

prey and calculated that, when all the mice were ingested and digested, he'd have sixteen inches in length, a half-inch in diameter of prime snake meat that could easily be grilled right on the hot plate's coils. That is, if the electricity held out. If not, he could finish up the job using candles.

While the snake went about its serious business, Bob did some exercises. He stretched his arms and circled them, he did knee bends and made a few attempts at push-ups.

Pushing up and dropping down, he thought about his wife and who might be exercising on the mat of her muscular body at that very moment. He found himself fighting back tears. When his depression passed, Bob pulled himself off the wooden floor and did his best to feed the few citizens of Petropolis.

After a few days, Bob had second thoughts about fattening his snake. It was taking forever. But when he checked he saw fewer and fewer white mice until there were none.

And his snake had swelled magnificently. It was as corpulent as a sausage. He fired up the hot plate, readied a paper plate, filled a cardboard coffee cup with another draught from the fish tank, put on his makeshift gloves. This time the snake that had hung like a strand of overdone spaghetti was full of piss and vinegar, hissing and biting on its way to Berman's table. Bob took Berman's Swiss Army knife and clipped off the snake's ugly head. He chopped the snake into inch-long tidbits, singing as he worked, as cheerful as a Texas cowboy stewing a rattler. Bob was ready for a hearty feed. He gazed at the diced snake steaks and shook his head. Mice or no mice, there wasn't enough meat to fill a fashion model so why kid himself? Why live in denial?

Bob took his disappointment in stride. He fed part of the snake to the gerbils, a bit of poetic justice considering their rodent ancestry, tossed a few shards to the turtles and served a choice few inches to the spavined kitty/cat that had long since finished the last of the stinking cat food. The feline gobbled its ration and looked up at Bob, mewing a sorrowful plea for more. Bob went to the budgie cage. He had no fruit, lettuce or seeds for the bird which was already beyond fight or flight, so he did the merciful thing and gave it to the furball whose cries grew stronger at the prospect of a feathered dessert.

Bob played with the purring pussycat, rounded up the turtles and

boiled them out of their shells. He remembered a turtle he had when he was a kid. It had MIAMI BEACH painted on its back. What was his turtle's fate? He came home from school one day and it was gone. His mother said it must have been kidnapped and soothed Bob's misery with a batch of fresh muffins, yes, corn muffins plump and springy. The turtle soup, even with floating bits of meat, wasn't the meal he was waiting for. Bob let the brew cool then gave it to the gerbils. Instead of drinking, they spilled the broth onto the floor. Bob saw a roach dash out from behind a counter and head for the warm pool. He stomped the roach and fed it to a salamander, then fed salamander parts to some Easter chicks he discovered in a homemade incubator. Those chicks had definite possibilities. But they were hardly hatched. There was no satisfaction there. Bob knew himself well enough to measure the cavern of his hunger. A nibble of chicken and a few soft bones wouldn't be enough to mobilize his gastric juices.

Bob was feeling weak. He moved a flattened pillow to the Petropolis door and camped there, praying for a knock. No wonder Berman died when he did. Business was nonexistent. Bob could hear car horns and truck motors from the street. He knew that hundreds of people must be hurrying past the building. Not one of them was in the market for a really good deal on a loving companion. Bob thought about those people, involved, focused, probably headed home carrying bags of succulents from Balducci's or maybe the Jefferson or the A&P. They could be aimed for any one of a hundred restaurants in the area. He dwelt on those thoughts but his own mouth was too dry to salivate. He drifted in and out of sleep, mocked by twilight dreams of a Lasagna Wife or a Rack of Lamb Mistress. Sex with those amalgams took place on beds of mashed or home-fried potatoes. His orgasms produced wan spurts of gravy.

Bob knew he had to keep in motion while he waited rescue. He'd heard many tales of people stranded in lifeboats bobbing around in undrinkable seas or buried under tons of earth. They'd be found alive and reasonably well after all hope was abandoned. Always those blessed ones had stories about how they kept their spirits up by using false hope as a paddle to thwart the reaper. Compared to them, Bob was in the catbird seat. He had a food supply and reserves of body fat to get him to the day when some construction workers would come to convert Petropolis into a 4-room condo.

Bob dragged himself to the box where he'd stashed the chirpy chicks. They were still minuscule, not yet a match for a multi-vitamin pill. He worked up enough energy to twist their cute necks and feed them to the gerbils. Those gerbils were doing fine. They were the size of piglets. Seeing them finish off the chicks, Bob could taste paradise. He snapped open Berman's Swiss Army knife and tested the blade.

Bob thrust the blade into one of the gerbil bodies. The gamble paid off. The remaining gerbil wasted no time mourning. Its needle teeth buzzed greedily through its roommate's glossy pelt. While the gerbil chomped at a tiny wish bone, Bob went to see how his new goldfish was doing. It was doing fine, as happy as Midas had been. Bob shook some minced worms into the tank and gave it a knowing wink.

Bob felt sorry about the pussy but he'd made up his mind that the gerbil would cook more to his standards. Even a starving mewer would be worth a few more ounces of tender gerbil gut. A merger was definitely in order. Yawning, a bit woozy, he went to dispatch the expendable kitten/cat and was amazed to see it had transformed to a full blown cat. It wasn't cute anymore. That made things easier. But what happened to time?

"How long have I been stuck in here?" Bob yelled to the dead Berman who lay molding, polluting the otherwise breathable Petropolis's air. "When that gerbil is done, crusty and juicy, an eat-your-heart-out-James-Beard banquet, don't think Bob Aker is going to share with you, Berman. My former wife often accused me of being a human garbage disposal, and this time she'd be absolutely correct. That gerbil is mine nose to balls, so don't ask for a place at the table. I'm the one destined to bear witness."

Bob opened the cat cage. He closed his fingers around the Swiss Army knife while he gave the cat a few strokes. "Nice parting gifts," Bob said. "Like on *Wheel of Fortune*."

He jabbed with the knife but the cat nipped at his hand, then leapt through the opening. It landed on the floor with a soft thud and disappeared in the murk. "Here baby, baby," Bob cooed. "Here pretty pussy. Come back to Uncle Bob. Hurry up. It's time." Bob searched for the cat without finding a trace. Sooner or later the cat would emerge looking for some digestible affection. Bob was famous for patience.

Later, when he went to feed his goldfish, he found the tank empty. "So be it," Bob said. "Let's be a grownup about this. Cat eats fish. Gerbil gets

that much more cat to digest. Bob eats more gerbil. It's the way of things." Bob improvised a dance. He was dancing when the electricity quit again. He took his Dunhill and lit a few candle stubs.

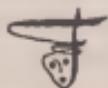
Bob went to visit the tender, round gerbil. "Hang in there," he said. "Dinner is practically on the table. The bad news is, the Supreme Court denied your appeal. The good news is that fucking cat will be your last supper." The lights came back on after a few hours. Bob went to the office, held his nose, frowned at Berman, and clicked on the hot plate's switch. Its coils glowed like cartoon eyes. "Here, cat," Bob yelled, "Mr. Gerbil is famished. I can use a few calories myself. Don't make things harder than they already are. I promise you a better world, a place where cats are emperors. It beats scrounging for goldfish. All right, then. Let's consider a deal. How'd you like a gerbil sandwich? Sound good? It could be arranged. I'm flexible. Cat?"

A month later Petropolis's landlord had Berman's door smashed open. What he found gave the city its daily jolt. There were the scraps of two human bodies scattered among assorted rubble. One was the former proprietor, Mr. Berman. The second could not be identified. It was presumed that Berman died resisting a robbery, but not before he got his revenge on the intruder.

The only thing moving was the biggest cat the landlord, or the cops he called, ever saw. A cat the size of a Doberman. It was standing on a bone pile playing with a set of keys.

The story made the six o'clock news. The landlord told a reporter, "It's my kind of cat. There was instant chemistry between us. Call it synchronicity. Call it love. Call it what you want. One thing sure, I'll make sure it gets a good home and that's a solemn promise. If any of your viewers out there are interested in adoption...."

Bob's ex-wife saw the broadcast. She smiled at the landlord's unusual display of compassion. "People like that make me proud," she said to her lover, a man who weighed less than half of what was left of Bob Aker's shrunken behind. "You know what? I think I just might call the station."



*Garth Nix is an Australian who is best known to readers worldwide for his books for young readers, including *Sabriel* and *Shade's Children*. His most recent novel is *The Seventh Tower*, the first in a series. This foray into the Arthurian mythos marks his F&SF debut in a most welcome manner.*

Under the Lake

By Garth Nix

MERLIN HAS COME AGAIN, down to where the light has gone and there is only darkness. Darkness and pressure, here where the water is as cold and hard as steel. He is bright himself, so bright that he hurts my eyes and I must lid them and turn away. Merlin uses that brightness, knowing that I cannot bear it, nor bear him seeing the creature I have become.

That is his strength, and it is the reason I will ultimately give him what he wants. For Merlin has power, and only he can give me what I need. He knows that, but as in any negotiation, he does not know at which point he will win. For I have two things that he seeks, and he has only the price of one.

I think he will choose Excalibur, for even he finds it difficult to think down here, under the lake. We can both see the strands of time that unravel from this choice, but I do not think Merlin sees as far as I in this darkness. He will choose the sword for his Arthur, when he could have the grail.

I admit the sword seems more readily useful. With the scabbard, of

course. But Merlin's sight does not see behind, only forward, and what he has learned of the sword is only a small part of the story.

If he chose to be less blinding, I might tell him more. But the light is cruel, and I do not care to prolong our conversation. I will merely cast my own mind back, while he talks. It is as effective a means as any to avoid the spell he weaves so cleverly behind his words. Only Merlin would seek to gull me so, even though he should know better. Let him talk, and I will send his spell back. Back into time, when I walked under the sun, in the land that was called Lyonnese.

Back into time, when the barbarians first landed on Lyonnese's sweet shores, and the people came to me, begging for a weapon that would save them. They had no fear of me in those days, for I had long held a woman's shape, and I had never broken the agreement I made with their ancestors long ago. Not that they ever sought me out in times of peace and plenty, for they also remembered that I did nothing without exacting a price.

As I did when they asked me to make a sword, a sword that could make a hero out of a husbandman, a warrior of an aleswiller, a savior from a swineherd. A sword that would give its wielder the strength of the snow-fed river Fleer, the speed of the swifts that flew around my hill, and the endurance of the great stone that sat upon my hill.

They were afraid of the barbarians, so they paid the price. A hundred maidens who came to my cold stone door, thinking they would live to serve me in some palace of arching caverns underearth. But it was their lives I wanted, not their service. It was their years I supped upon to feed my own, and their blood I used to quench the sword. I still thought of humans as I thought of other animals then, and felt nothing for their tears and cries. I did not realize that as I bound the power of river, swifts and stone into the metal, I also filled the sword with sorrow and the despair of death.

They called the sword Excalibur, and it seemed everything they had asked. It took many months before they discovered it was both more and less. It was used by several men against the barbarians, and delivered great victories. But in every battle, the wielder was struck with a battle madness, a melancholy that would drive him alone into the midst of the enemy. All would be strong and swift and untiring, but eventually they would always be struck down by weight of numbers, or number of wounds.

The people came to me again, and demanded that I mend the madness the sword brought, or make the wielder impossible to wound, so the sword could be used to its full effect. They argued that I had not fulfilled the bargain and would pay no more.

But I sat silent in my hill, the barbarians still came in their thousands, and there were few who dared to wield Excalibur, knowing that they would surely die.

So they brought the two hundred youths I had demanded. Some even came gladly, thinking they would meet their sweethearts who had gone before. This time, I was more careful, taking their futures from them without warning, so there was no time for pain, despair or sadness. From their hair I wove the scabbard that would give the wearer a hundred lives between dawn of one day and dawn the next.

I knew nothing of human love then, or I would have demanded still younger boys, who had no knowledge of the girls who came to my hill the year before. The scabbard did make the bearer proof against a multiplicity of wounds, but it also called to the sword and held it like a lover, refusing to let go. Only a man of great will could draw the sword, or a sorcerer, and there were few of those in Lyonnese, for I disliked their kind. Many a would-be hero died with Excalibur still sheathed upon his belt. Even a hundred lives is not enough against a hundred hundred wounds.

Each time, the sword and scabbard came back to me, drawn to the place of their making. Each time I returned them to the good folk of Lyonnese, as they continued their largely losing war against the barbarians. Not that I cared who won one way or another, save for tidiness and a certain sense of tradition.

Many people came to me in those times of war, foolishly ignoring the pact that spoke of the days and seasons when I would listen and spare their lives. Consuming them, I learned more of humanity, and more of the magic that lurked within their brief lives. It became a study for me, and I began to walk at night, learning in the only way I knew. Soon, it was mostly barbarians I learned from, for the local folk resumed the practice of binding rowan twigs in their hair, and they remembered not to walk in moonlight. Once again children were given small silver coins to wear as earrings. Some nights I gathered many blood-dappled coins, but garnered neither lives nor knowledge.

In time the barbarians learned too, and so it was that a deputation came to me one cold Midwinter Day, between noon and the setting of the sun. It was composed of the native folk I knew so well, and barbarians, joined together in common purpose. They wanted me to enforce a peace upon the whole land of Lyonnese, so that no man could make war upon another.

The price they were prepared to pay was staggering, so many lives that I would barely need to feed again for a thousand years. Given my new curiosity about humankind, the goal was also fascinating, because for the first time in my long existence, I knew not how it could be achieved.

They paid the price, and for seven days, a line of men, women and children wound its way into my hill. I had learned a little, for this third time, so I gave them food and wine and smoke that made them sleep. Then as they slept, I harvested their dreams, even as I walked among them and drank their breath.

The dreams I took in a net of light, down through the earth to where the rocks themselves were fire, and there I made the Grail. A thing of such beauty and of such hope began to form that I forgot myself in the wonder of creation, and poured some of my dreams in it too, and a great part of my power.

Perhaps some of my memory went in the making of the Grail, because I had forgotten what my power meant to the land of Lyonnese. All that long climb back from the depths of the earth I gazed at what I had made, and I thought nothing of the rumbling and shaking at my feet. Down there the earth was never still. I did not realize that its mutterings were following me back into the light.

I emerged from my hill to find the deputation gone, panicked by the ground that shook and roared beneath them. I held the grail aloft, and shouted that it would bring peace to all who drank from it. But even as I spoke, I saw the horizon lift up like a folded cloth, and the blue of the sky was lost in the terrible darkness of the sea. The sea, rising up higher than my hill or the mountains behind, a vast and implacable wave that seemed impossible — till I realized that it was not the sea that rose, but Lyonnese that fell. And I remembered.

Long ago, long ago, I had shored up the very foundations of the land. Now, in my making of the Grail, I had torn away the props. Lyonnese

would drown, but I would not drown with it. I became a great eagle and rose to the sky, the Grail clutched in my talons. Or rather, I tried to. My wings beat in a frenzy, but the Grail would not move. I tried to let it go, but could not, and still the wave came on, till it blocked out the very sun and it was too late to be flying anywhere.

It was then I knew that the Grail brought not only peace, but judgment. I had filled it with the dreams of a thousand folk, dreams of peace and justice. But I had let other dreams creep in, and one of those was a dream that the white demon that preyed upon them in the moonlit nights would be punished for the deaths she wrought, and the fear she had brought upon the people.

The wave came upon me as I changed back to human shape, crushing me beneath a mountain wall of water, picking me up, Grail and all, for a journey without air and light that crossed the width of Lyonnese before it let me go. I was broken at the end, my human form beyond repair. I took another shape, the best I could make, though it was not pleasing to mine or any other eyes. It is a measure of the Grail's mercy that this seemed sufficient punishment, for only then could I let it fall.

I did let it go, but never from my sight. For now, even waking, I dreamed of all the folk of Lyonnese who died under the wave, and only the Grail would give me untroubled rest. Years passed, and I slithered from sea to river to lake, till at last I came here, following the drifts and tumblings of the Grail. I was not surprised to find that Excalibur awaited me, still sheathed and shining, despite its long sojourn in the deep. It seemed fitting that everything I made should lie together, both the things and the fate. Even the Grail seemed content to sit, as if waiting for the future I could not see.

I cannot remember when Merlin first found me here, but it is not so strange, given our birthing together so long ago. He has studied humanity with greater care than I, and used his power with much more caution.

There! I have left his spell behind with my drowned past, and now we shall bargain in earnest. He will give me back my human shape, he says, in return for the sword. He knows it is an offer I cannot refuse. What is the sword to me, compared to the warmth of the sun on my soft skin, the colors that my eyes will see anew, the cool wind that will caress my face?

I will give him the sword. It will bring Arthur triumph, but also

sorrow, as it has always done, for his victories will never be his own. The scabbard too, will save him and doom him, for a man who cannot be wounded is not a man that a woman can choose to love.

Merlin is clever. He will not touch the sword himself, but will tell me when I must give it up to Arthur. Only then will I receive my side of the bargain. It is curious to feel expectation again, and something that I must define as hope.

Even the brightness seems less wearing on my eyes, or perhaps it is Merlin who has chosen to be kind. Yes, now he talks of the Grail, and asks me to give it up. Merlin does not understand its nature, I think, or he would not be trying to get it for himself.

The Grail will wait, I tell him. Go and fetch your King, your Arthur. I will give him the sword, the scabbard too, and may he use them well.

Merlin knows when to wait. He has always been good at waiting. He leaps upward in a flurry of light and I slide back into my cave, to coil around the hollow that contains my treasures. The Grail was there yesterday, but not now. If I thought Merlin had stolen it, I would be angry. Perhaps I would pursue him, up into the warmer, lighter waters, to see if his power is as great as what remains of mine.

But I will not, for I know the Grail has left me without Merlin's tricks or thievery, as it has left a thousand times before. I have always followed it in the past, seeking the relief it gave. Now I think time has served that same purpose, if not so well. Time and cold and depth. It slows thought, and dulls memory. Only Merlin's coming has briefly woken me at all, I realize, and there lies the irony of our exchange.

I will give the sword to Arthur, but without the Grail I do not think I will long remain in human shape. The Grail taught me guilt, but it also drank it up. Without it, I shall have to think too much and remember too much. I will have to live with a light that blinds me, until at last I have used up all the lives of Lyonesse that lie within my gut.

No. The Grail has gone. When Excalibur is likewise gone, I shall return to the darkness and the cold, to this place where a dull serpent can sleep without dreaming. Till once again I must obey the call of strength and sorrow, of love and longing, of justice and of peace. All these things of human magic, that I never knew till I made the sword and scabbard, and never understood until I made the Grail. 

Shayne Bell reports that his tally of published stories has crossed the three-dozen mark and hit the big four-oh, with recent entries in Interzone, Realms of Fantasy, and the anthology Vanishing Acts. His last appearance here was in April, with "And All Our Banners Flying." This new one is a very different sort of tale, an offworld incident that's liable to stay in your mind for some time.

Red Flowers and Ivy

By M. Shayne Bell

WHEN HE WOKE, HE TURNED on his torch and saw the vine crawling down the cave tunnel toward him. It moved so slowly — the cave was almost too cold for it — but red buds still formed in the light. He burned it, then ran up the tunnel torching the thin, trembling vine, choking in the smoke till he tripped and fell.

The vine shivered, turned its black stub toward him, and crawled for his head.

He vomited. Pollen-induced nausea, he told himself. Nothing more.

But nothing stopped it. It was a good hunter. He knew just how good. He watched it inch toward him till it was only two feet away, then he stood and backed down the tunnel. It crawled on — warily, he thought — and hesitated on the edge of the vomit. It turned the stub away. One leaf farther back reached out to touch it, testing, making sure — at once a hollow tube behind the leaf stretched out and plunged in, writhing and sucking. Red buds formed behind each third leaf.

He staggered away, down the tunnel and into the last gallery, to pools

at the back where the cave ended. He turned off the torch — his only light — to conserve energy, then sat in the sudden darkness.

It had trapped him. It had choked the cave's entrance shut. He had nowhere left to run. He could not burn his way out — the pollen would stop him first. The vomit would stop it for a short time, but it would come. Buds would open. Pollen would drift down to him and make him sleep.

He ripped off a shirt-sleeve, plunged it in a pool of water, wrapped it tight around his nose and mouth. If I can keep the sleeve wet, he thought, and still breathe —

He heard it: a distant sound like that of a cork pulled from a bottle of wine. A bud opened. Another. Two more. He splashed water over the cloth and fumbled for the comm unit in his pants pocket, turned it on.

"Lieutenant?" the comm said. The computer on the other end had the soft voice of a woman.

"Has the *Scimitar* sent rescue?"

"No. The landing bay is not yet repaired."

It was why he and the two members of his team had stayed on the world conducting more and more studies — a T-34 had exploded in the docking bay. No ship-to-land craft had been able to dock or take off since then. They'd been stranded without possibility of refueling for the return trip — no refuel drones could descend to give them what they needed to return or even just to fly one hundred miles away, even just that.

"Are you still broadcasting distress signals?" he asked the computer.

"On all standard and seventeen nonstandard frequencies."

"And my coordinates?"

"Your present location is — "

"Are you broadcasting them?"

"At intervals between the distress signals, together with details about your situation."

"But there is no time," he whispered.

Brant had died first. Sarah had found him still alive but lying in mud staring up at nothing while the vine bored through his suit into his chest. He and Sarah had buried Brant away from the ship, in a grave as deep as they could dig.

Sarah had gone next. She had lain comatose in the lander for two days

after breaking a vial of concentrated pollen she'd prepared for study. Everything he'd done to try to save her had failed. Outside, the vine had quietly surrounded the lander.

She'd briefly regained consciousness, once. She'd felt convinced that bacteria from Brant's body would kill the vine. "Just like Wells's Martians," she'd whispered, almost sadly.

But it hadn't. He'd buried her next to Brant.

And he'd stayed with the lander as long as he could, in contact with the *Scimitar*, hoping for the repairs to be finished. He'd tried to keep the vine burned from the lander, but more and more of it had come and he could not keep it back. When it began to break through the hatch, he'd packed food and supplies, jettisoned the rest of the food, and emptied the sewers so the vine wouldn't tear the lander apart and destroy the computer. He'd dressed in a bio-suit that would protect him from the pollen and burned his way out of the lander into the jungle past the vine.

T O THE EAST were mountains, far off, white capped. His plan was to reach the mountains, climb above the vine's biozone, and wait there for rescue. They had landed in a river delta rich with life. What he wanted now was to be someplace high and cold where he was the only living thing.

By nightfall, he was in a place where the forest canopy was so thick he could not see the mountains. He stashed his gear at the base of a tree, and something small and black in the underbrush rushed away — something else alive here, he marveled. He and Sarah and Brant had cataloged far fewer species in this lush forest than they had expected. He now knew why. He wondered how anything survived. Speed and cunning, he thought. Speed and determination. He was glad to have seen the animal. It gave him hope. He climbed into the canopy: and the mountains were still far off. They seemed no closer.

Something tugged at his foot. He looked down and saw a tendril of vine circled around his boot. He kicked, but the vine's grip tightened. He tried to pull it off, but more and more of the vine kept circling his boot, pulling him deeper into the darkening canopy.

Something touched his hand, and it was the vine. Another tendril dangled down toward his head, the flowers on it lovely and red.

He pulled out his knife and cut his hand free. He cut his foot free and climbed down through the tree, faster and faster.

The vine had found his food. His pack was covered in a mass of seething, flowered vine. He cut it back, threw it in heaps and burned it. He burned back the tendrils reaching down for him from above.

His pack had been torn apart. The food was scattered. He salvaged the water-filtration unit, the med kit, his sleeping gear. He took the packages of food that hadn't been opened.

And he ran for the mountains.

THE VINE WAITED on the trail. It was a clever hunter. If you were panicked — if you ran in terror — you'd never see its tendrils stretched across the trail at ankle-height.

He tripped and fell, his gear scattered around him, and a mass of vine fell on him. It circled his body and choked him and tried to stab through his biosuit with its rigid tubes.

He tried to stay calm. He cut the vine again and again, and he kept cutting till he could roll away.

It followed quickly, all the parts he had cut it into. It had been slow and sluggish — but still deadly — by day. He learned it was a nocturnal hunter.

"Lieutenant?" the voice out of the comm unit said. "Lieutenant?"

He didn't want to answer it. He hadn't slept for two days. The vine had followed him. It, and others like it. Vines seemed to be everywhere: in the clearings, in the trees, in the undergrowth stretched across the trails.

"There were these two guys sitting at a bar — "

"Stop the jokes," he said.

"The ship ordered me to keep your spirits up. Jokes are calculated to do that. I have heard different flight crews tell four hundred ninety-seven complete jokes and thirty-three partial jokes interrupted by necessary work. I remember them all and can divide them into subcategories. What type of joke do you like best?"

"Sleepy jokes, stories about sleep — anything about sleep. I'm so tired."

"Two hundred and thirty-nine of my recorded jokes mention items related to sleep — beds for instance. Do you want to hear them?"

He turned off the comm unit.

When he turned it back on, it was silent. He let it stay that way. He needed the computer, but he liked it quiet. After a time, it spoke.

"Don't do that again," it said.

"So now you're giving me orders?"

"I was worried."

That made him stop. If he could have opened the visor on the biosuit to wipe his face, he would have. If he could have looked at the computer, he would have. He looked around for the vine, but couldn't see it.

"How close are the mountains?" the computer asked.

"What do you mean by 'worried'?"

"How close are the mountains, Lieutenant?"

"Answer me."

"You are my charge. I have orders to help you."

"You helped me before you received your present orders."

"It is what I am made for."

They were both quiet for a time. "Are you all right?" he asked it, then.

"The vine is not attacking the ship anymore, but the ship is highly damaged. It will never fly again. I am intact inside it."

"They'll take you out and carry you back to the *Scimitar*."

"If they have time."

"You cost too much to abandon."

It was silent, then.

He thought it had been an odd conversation.

He wished later that he hadn't told it they would come for it only because it cost money. It was from Earth, after all, and they were all a long way from Earth. They all needed each other if ever they were to go home.

He tried to sleep in a rocky clearing, he was so exhausted, and he did sleep for ten minutes — then it was on him, and he was cutting at it, slashing, cutting —

And he saw blood: his blood.

It was frenzied then at the taste of his blood. He cut and cut and tried to run, dragging it after him, slashing at the stabbing tubes stretching for his leg.

He'd cut through his biosuit. He held his breath and slashed his way free and ran.

His head was giddy with the pollen. Tying off the suit above the cut did no good: he'd learned that human skin absorbed the chemicals in the pollen, though not as quickly as if he'd breathed them.

"Lieutenant," the comm unit said.

"Yes," he said.

"You believe it will not follow you into cold places?"

"It's what I hope."

"Mountains are not the only cold places."

He found a cave in the foothills. He could see the vine massed in the scree below him, following.

It was cold inside the cave.

"You can sleep here," the comm unit said.

Yes, he thought. Surely he could sleep here.

When he woke, the cave was so quiet. Nothing was on him. Nothing was tugging at his feet or trying to choke him. His leg where he had cut himself ached, but his head was clear.

He took off his helmet and ate. He leaned back and slept again for a time.

When he woke and walked to the opening, the vine had choked the entrance shut. He could not burn his way out. He could not hold his breath long enough. Tendrils were crawling slowly down the cave toward his feet.

"Lieutenant?"

The voice had been calling for some time. He struggled up, splashed water over the cloth around his face.

"Lieutenant?"

His joints ached, but he pulled out the comm unit. "Yes?" he whispered.

"Rescue parties from the Scim — "

"When?"

"Ten minutes ago. The initial party has flown to your cave. A second is here for the lander and me. They directed me to attempt to rouse you while they work."

He said nothing.

"Are you dressed in what remains of your biosuit?"

He felt around him for his helmet and the torn suit, but it was somewhere behind him, and he hurt. He felt so tired.

"How close is the vine?" the computer asked.

"I don't know. I turned off the torch — I can't see anything."

The computer said nothing to that. It expected a more factual reply. But the torch was next to his helmet — he remembered that now. He'd set the torch next to his helmet.

"How are you dressed? How close is the vine?"

He reached painfully behind him, feeling for the torch, but touched the vine.

"How close is the vine, lieutenant?"

He jerked back, dropped the comm unit, stumbled into the water.

"How close is the vine, lieutenant? Can you tell me?"

"Close!" He sank to his knees. The water rose barely above his waist. "Close. I can't see it in the dark."

"Lieutenant, find out where it is and move away from it."

The voice was muffled.

He reached down to splash water over his face and touched a vine floating toward him in the water. "No!" he shouted. He shoved it away and stumbled out of the pool. He kicked back the vine until he found his torch. The vine was everywhere in the gallery. He burned it until the fuel ran out. He heard buds popping open all around him in the darkness.

"Have you moved away from it, lieutenant?"

He didn't answer. He felt his way back to the pool and splashed water over the cloth. He thought of his helmet and torn biosuit, but knew they would do him little good. He'd seen the vine bore right through Brant's suit.

"The initial rescue party should reach your part of the cave in approximately one hour and twenty-three minutes."

He sank to his knees, shivering from more than the cold, his head so dizzy he could not stand.

"Lieutenant?"

"Yes?" he said.

"I want you to make it. I have. You must."

"I've done everything I can."

They were quiet for a time. The cold numbed him.

"Lieutenant?"

"Don't let them name this planet after me," he said.

"They have already."

He covered his face with his hands. He could smell the red flowers. 



"Paper or plastic?"



PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

*The Magazine Chums
Versus the Baron of Numedia*

by

C. J. Cutlyffe Heintz-Ketzep

*Author of "The Magazine Chums Meet the Distributor of Doom,"
"The Magazine Chums and the Case of the Disappearing Readers,"
"The Magazine Chums and the Great Paper Shortage," "The
Magazine Chums Apply for an Arts Council Grant," &c, &c*

Chapter 1

The Spinning of the Web

Into the cozy dim-lit reading room of the discreet gentlemen's club on Street and Smith Street, a room whose walnut-paneled walls had oft echoed to both the excited battle cries of the Magazine Chums and their contented post-adventure snores, a panting figure burst. Rushing past an elderly manservant — Phillips, the club's quiet and tactful majordomo — and nearly causing the aged butler to drop a tray of

Sapphire Gin and Quinine Water cocktails, the immoderately gasping visitor came to a stop at a herd of high-backed leather chairs clustered around a broad table like rhinos at a waterhole on the Rider Haggard estates. The polished tabletop was nearly obscured by dozens of plump magazines featuring gaily colored covers: *Railroad Stories*, *The Happy Magazine*, *Black Mask*, *Weird Tales*, *St. Nicholas*, *Blue Book*, *O*, and many others.

Pausing but a second to catch his breath, the flushed and stocky runner soon burst into speech. "Lord Pringle,

Lord Pringle! I have alarming news! We must assemble all the Chums!"

The sober, handsome chap thus wildly addressed looked up calmly from his study. Deliberately folding the Parisian newspaper he had been perusing so as to mark the exact point in that day's *feuilleton* where he had left off reading, Lord Pringle favored the messenger with a look of intense authority mixed with jollity and keen-wittedness.

"Come now, young Ashley," Lord Pringle admonished in a bantering tone, "no news of whatever degree of urgency can justify bad manners. Apologize first to old Phillips, then grab one of those delicious drinks he's compiled, sit yourself down, refresh your throat, and then finally recount your tale in good form."

Young Ashley did as he had been bade by the leader of the Magazine Chums — a group of which Ashley himself was not the lowliest member — and when his breathing had finally reestablished an even modulation and the hectic color had partially drained from his cheeks, he commenced to report on certain late-breaking developments in the very sphere of interests which the Magazine Chums inhabited.

"Despite my numerous professional deadlines, I permitted myself

to take a small break this morning," Ashley reluctantly confessed, "in between annotating the entire works of Max Brand and rereading the last twenty years of the *Strand*, and prior to working up a bibliography of Ayn Rand. Picking up a stray copy of that cheap trade journal, *Publishers' Weekly*, which I had inadvertently walked away with during my last trip to the library, I carelessly flicked through its tawdry pages. Imagine my horror when I came across this!"

With dramatic timing, Ashley whipped the magazine in question out of his coat pocket and displayed the offending article to Lord Pringle. Pringle took the magazine calmly, with a small smile, and began to read. But his easy demeanor gradually dwindled, until he too evinced some of Ashley's obvious horror. When he had finished perusing the dread text, Lord Pringle stood decisively and said, "Ashley, your instincts were sound. The Chums must be assembled in their entirety to deal with this new menace. You summon those who employ one of Mr. Alexander Graham Bell's contraptions in their residences, while I dispatch Morse-o-grams to the others!"

By early evening, all the Magazine Chums who could be reached and who could arrange swift trans-

portation to the club sat in congregation around the supper table, as Phillips served squab and bangers, with bumpers of bubbly. A stalwart group of men (and a select scattering of brave damsels), the Magazine Chums boasted a wide range of intelligent and sympathetic faces. Besides Ashley and Pringle, these noble souls were present:

Sir Francis Robinson, who in Khartoum had once endured through six hours of hot auction action despite having been wounded at the outset with a rusty staple.

Little Dicky Lupoff, the suave-voiced darling of those with Marconi-receivers.

Dame Lucy Sussex, heir to a large Australian sheep-dip fortune.

Devil-may-care solo aviatrix Elly Datlow, rumored to have romanced many of the crowned heads of Europe, including the infamous Count Guccione.

Hirsute Gordy van Gelder, whose mature wit and piercing gaze failed to betray his odd origins: an orphan, he had been raised by stuffed Esquimaux in a diorama at the Museum of Natural History.

Lady Ruth Berman, whose formal gardens at Castle Harmsworth replicated every flower mentioned in both the Shakespearean and Spenserian canons.

Quiet Victor Berch, who had once killed an armed assailant using only his pocket watch.

Wry Johnny Clute, joshingly addressed by his friends as "Mister Sesquipedalian."

Richie Bleiler, who had emerged from the literal shadow cast by his famous father only after he had finally convinced his progenitor to fold up the bumbershoot the old man eccentrically kept open indoore and out, through fair weather and foul.

In addition to those assembled here this fateful night, the Magazine Chums numbered further scores, all of them Titans in their own right, without a trace of brummagem or bloviation in their wise and forthright speech. Those unable to attend this gathering were scattered far and wide across the globe, in such exotic locales as the United States of America (Texas, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island), the Canadian Provinces, and Lapland, pursuing the researches that had made them rich and famous.

When the last sip of postprandial claret had been savored, Lord Pringle stood and silently regarded his troops. Then he began his solemn oration.

"Ladies and gentlemen, despite our multifarious interests we are

united on one front. And that front can be summarized in a single glorious word: magazines! Reviews or journals, pulps or slicks, annuals or weeklies, these frail, colorful, exotic vessels of enlightenment are the star around which we all orbit — some of us closer to the primary than others, but all reliant on the stellar warmth and light. From their humble beginnings among the papyri of Egypt" — here Lord Pringle nodded to Berch — "which ancient tradition our own Victor has discovered to include such early titles as *Thrilling Crocodile Tales* and *Astounding Stories of Metempsychosis*, down to the highly developed organs we enjoy today, magazines have drawn us all joyfully together. Our pleasure and wonderment at the myriad manifestations of the periodical printed word have filled untold hours of our lives. In some sense, we have all dedicated our very beings to the continuation and improvement of magazines.

"And now I must tell you that the actual existence and future of magazines as we know them is at dire risk!"

From the Magazine Chums issued a collective gasp of startlement. Lord Pringle capitalized on their undivided attention by displaying the revelatory article. "Brother

Ashley has discovered that an evil technocratic genius intends to render all our beloved magazines obsolete within a few years. You see him depicted here, a bloated plutocrat who bills himself as the Baron of Numedia. Employing hordes of ill-washed and unmannerly underlings whom he calls 'software and hardware engineers,' he has unleashed on the unsuspecting globe a creature dubbed 'the worldwide web.' He claims that this Frankenstein's monster of his will soon devour all current magazines, rendering their printed forms exiguous."

Lord Pringle paused, and surveyed the puzzled expressions worn by his comrades. Reluctant to confess their ignorance of the exact nature of this new menace, they were saved by young Ashley's polite cough.

"I've been boning up all afternoon on this new phenomenon, in my spare moments while I was handling the affairs of several dozen literary estates of which I am the humble executor. The 'web' referred to by the notorious Baron is not a physical one, but rather a conceptually subtle lattice of interconnected home televisors and remote Babbage devices known as 'servitors,' which latter machines both hold 'content' and distribute it to

the individual 'users,' in both pictorial and alphabetical forms. What the Baron proposes is that all conventionally printed and disseminated magazines shall now 'migrate' to his 'web,' existing only as intangible coded swarms of atomies until displayed on a personal televiser."

Silence reigned as the shocked Chums sought to grasp the full implications of this horrid news. After some minutes, they all burst out in a flurry of questions.

"What of back issues?" "Users be dashed! What will become of good old-fashioned readers?" "No inks! How can there be no inks?" "Can one 'fold down' the corner of a page? I think not!" "Will we still have editors?" "Who will pay good money for such an insubstantial abomination?"

Lord Pringle raised his arms in a quelling gesture. "Decorum, Brothers and Sisters, decorum!" His plea succeeded in restoring quiet to the room, but the sense of shock still lingered. Lord Pringle knew he must rally the broken spirits of his followers, and summoned every iota of rhetoric persuasion he possessed.

"I confess I do not have the answers to your questions. Discovering all the implications of this menacing Moloch must be one of our first priorities. But even without

all the facts, I can affirm at the outset that we have never faced a greater challenge than — if I may coin a fantastical term — these 'daedalus-zines.' They have the potential to toss our familiar periodicals onto the dustbin of history. Already Brother Ashley has collated some disturbing statistics regarding the otherwise-unexplained falling circulation of such stalwarts as *McClure's* and *Scribner's*.

"How can we meet this crisis? Only by striving to produce the best d——d magazines possible! We handmaidens to the Muse of periodicals must gird our loins for war! All of us who are editors, publishers and writers — whom the Baron would dare to re-label 'content providers'! — must strive for new heights of creativity! We must rethink all our assumptions, jolt ourselves out of any stale ruts, and aspire to empyrean standards! No longer can we plow the same old familiar ground. We must reconstitute ourselves and our products for a new century! Only thus can we insure the survival of magazines as we know and love them!"

A chorus of loud huzzahs — interspersed with shouts of "Down with the degenerate d-zines!" — greeted Lord Pringle's speech. He allowed himself to bask for a moment in the

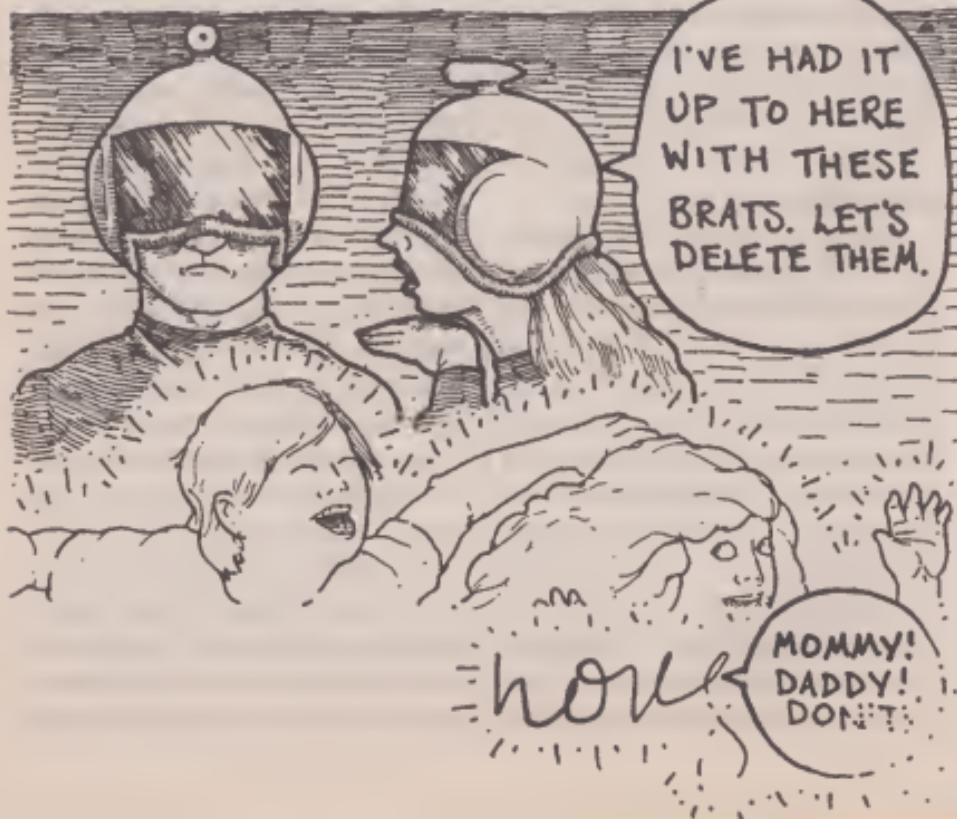
warmth of his comrades' approbation, the thrilling sense of their dedication. But he knew that in reality they faced a dreadful uphill battle, one that would tax every fiber

of their beings, with no guarantee of ultimate victory.

Next installment: "The Baron's Secret Weapon: Free Erotica!" 

SPECULATIONS

VIRTUAL KIDS WILL SURPASS MEAT CHILDREN IN POPULARITY.



M. Rickert is the author of the sensual "The Girl Who Ate Butterflies" (Aug. 1999) and the lighthearted "Angel Face" (July 2000). Now she gives us a dark and unusual selkie story that incorporates some true-life pinniped behavior that might come as a bit of a shock. Ms. Rickert says this new story is a self-contained incident from the novel she is currently finishing, a dreamtime fantasy.

Moorina

By M. Rickert

HER NAME IS MOORINA. Keeper of song. Children, old ones, everyone loves to be near Moorina. When she opens her mouth, there is song. "If the sun had a voice," they say, "it would be this voice." The Old One, in the maddening way she has, both agrees and disagrees. "It is true," she says, "though this is not that voice." Moorina has an even heart, loves equally and favors none until her fourteenth year, when she develops a special fondness for the seals that gather on the rocks at sundown. There, she sings her golden songs and the seals sing with her. This was a long time ago, when seals still had beautiful voices. They come from many miles to join the chorus and crowd on the rocks around Moorina. The island trembles with their song. It becomes known as Seal Island.

White hunters hear about this island, far out in the sea where seals number thousands, and even the white sands are made dark by them. It is possible someone mentions the beautiful songs but years of hunting have destroyed their hearing. As their boat steers toward Seal Island the hunters only hear a sound like waterfalls, the rush of lifeblood they seek to silence.

The General lost his name years ago in the storm of clubs and blood he commandeered. It is said he can kill a man or boy as easily as a seal, and has. A young boy sneaks aboard the great ship. He wants to be a hunter like the General. When he is found, the General says he is more like a seal and clubs him, laughing as he does so. The General has a deft hand for death and the blow is placed, without thought, perfectly between the boy's eyes. They throw his body overboard. When they reach their next port, three of the men sneak away in the night. They tell this story and others. Ever after, wherever his name is spoken, the General is feared.

But the people of Seal Island never hear these stories. When the ship approaches, a dark scathe on the horizon, they watch it with awe and reverence. Moorina and the seals sing the ship in. It sets anchor. Twelve small boats row toward the shore carrying the General and his men.

As they approach they see that the stories about the island were not exaggerated. It is a beach of seals. The General raises his binoculars and tries to count. There are more seals than numbers he knows. He gives up counting and scans the view. He passes her twice before he realizes she is not a seal. Moorina, with her dark hair and dark body. He sees her mouth open and close, though all he can hear is the intense sound of waterfalls, a deafening rush of liquid in his ears. With this limited observation, he believes he understands.

The Island people have heard of the White ones. They have seen the white bones dug up by forest animals. The Dead. How have these Dead gotten lost on their journey to the sky? They prepare ceremony of dance and song. Welcome the lost Dead and help them on their journey home. The Dead sit stiffly, already foreigners on this fertile ground. Speaking a strange tongue. Pointing to the seals and grinning.

The General is the whitest of all. He has yellow hair and teeth, and blue eyes so pale they are almost white. He sits at the feast as still as a rock and does not dance. Some of the men try, but death has made their bones stiff and they have forgotten the movements.

"We have come for the seals," says the General, pointing to the shore.

"We welcome and honor your presence," says the Old One, pointing to the stars. "We sing you to your new home."

Each speaks in separate tongue.

The General shrugs his shoulders and picks up his gun. "Now," he says to his men, who pick up their guns.

Everybody stands still. The White Ones only move their eyes. Looking first where the guns point, then to the General, then back to where the guns point. The Island people watch this strange eye dance. "These pogies don't know what hit them," one of the Dead says. The Old One takes half a step forward. She points to the stars. There is a blast. A spurt of red. The Old One falls to the ground. Smoke steams from the General. He grins his yellow teeth and points the gun with a motion that makes them all understand they are to stay back.

The worst that can be done is done. The Island women watch the Old Ones fall, the children, the men. Even babies are not spared. Ropes are used. Fire. Of course, the guns. Until only the women are left. Then the hunters use their bodies as weapons too. The air stinks of blood. The earth grows a song of grief and bones.

By sundown, it is fair to say even the women are mostly gone. Like shells that hold the sound of water, they hold the breath of life, but are given, at least partly, to death. The Dead Ones herd them, pointing guns and grunting, down to the shore, where they are made to understand that they are to sit on the rocks. By opening his great yellow mouth, the General communicates that he intends them all to sing, the way Moorina used to. When they open their mouths there is no song, only a terrible braying sound, a wounded bellow. Even Moorina's voice does not survive. The women sit on the rocks and look at each other with stone eyes, opening their mouths to sing the sorrow. The hunters do not seem to notice but wait behind the rocks with clubs at their sides. The seals do not notice either. They seem to think it is some sort of game and bray the horrible noise in reply. Their beautiful black bodies surround the women, their black eyes trusting, until the clubs come raining down. You think there could be no more weeping. But the women weep. The seals fall dead by the hundreds. Some, in terror, look to Moorina.

The first night is followed by others. The women are kept in tents at the edge of the hunters' camp. Each evening they are herded to the rocks and made to bray the seals to shore. The hunters, who cannot count, soon come to realize that there are enough, already more than they can possibly carry in the boats but still, the General commands. More. More.

The women are ordered to skin the seals. The pelts hang in the sun and stack up around them like towers of doom. Those who do not cooperate are shot, or clubbed, or set on fire. Depending on the General's mood.

When Moorina feels the new life grow inside her, she wants to tear it out and thrash it against the rocks. Moorina thinks this. The one who used to sing the sun. She hears herself think this and knows something has to be done.

That night, in the tent, Moorina combs her hair with bone and plaits it with shells. The other women watch. She paints her skin with dirt and red clay she digs from the earth.

"Look at this one," says Phyloma. "She thinks she is still the sun. Just the way the Old One said you would be." Phyloma turns to Moorina. "She always said that you would forget us."

Moorina draws the knife from the leaf rope at her waist and holds it up in the dark tent. "Do you think this will only cut seals?" she asks.

The women smile, small smiles that disappear quickly. Moorina draws back the tent flap and the gun points at her. "I am prepared to see your General," she says, trusting the Ancestors to help this evil one understand her tongue. "I bring him the gift of my body."

The hunter sets down the gun. "Oh boy," he says, "get a load of this."

The men, sitting around the campfire, turn to see Moorina standing in the tent entrance, a wild woman if they had ever seen one, dressed in dirt and bones. They hoot and cheer.

The women in the tent watch Moorina's back tremble.

"Let her come," calls the General, "we can use some entertainment."

The tent flaps shut. The women creep closer together. Without Moorina, they feel cold.

Moorina walks to the circle of men and fire. Her shells and bones clink with each step. This to marriage attire. She holds up her chin.

"God, she's a ugly fuck," says the General. The men laugh.

Moorina begins to dance. "Oh Ancestors," she calls, raising her arms to the stars, "drum for me tonight."

The men around the fire applaud and cheer. Raise their cups to the sky and bring them to their lips, leaning so far back some of them fall over.

"She's so ugly I wouldn't touch her with a stick," says the hunter whose child she carries.

Moorina stamps her feet and circles. Closes her eyes. Begins singing the wordless chant she has heard sung all those times before when she was still wondering who she would choose.

"I think she's putting a hex on us," says one of the hunters.

She can hear drums. The Old Ones drumming and the women singing by her side. "Oh Sisters," she calls, "sing me to a new life."

The women sing, the chant so close, Moorina opens her eyes and sees that they have joined her, each with a leaf rope tied at her waist. They are a small tribe now. There are many more hunters. The women know how this will end.

"I say we fuck 'em all and get 'em to shut up," says one of the hunters.

They form a circle around the men. "Oh Ancestors," Moorina sings, "We come to you tonight. We bring the lost."

She stands behind the General. He turns to the hunter who had spoken. "I think you're right," he says.

"Now," Moorina cries.

Each hand at roped waist raises up with a seal skin knife. Moorina thrusts the knife into the General's neck and tears it across his throat. Skin thinner than a seal's. The last breath seeped in red. The stench of blood. She lets him fall to the dirt. She hears the sharp blasts and feels pain tear through her. Dying with the General she sentences herself to a marriage in the deathrealm with him. But there will be no others. It is only her life and the life of her sisters, already gone since the arrival of the Dead. No babies grown in this blood of hate. She closes her eyes. "Oh Ancestors," she whispers, "I am coming." She feels herself rise without body. The evil General, at her side, twists into her like a knotted rope.

PAIN. NOTHING before has felt like this. Even her breath hurts. She opens her eyes into the General's dead ones, the slit of red and red down his shirt. She rises up like a baby on trembling arms. The fire cinders ash.

Phyloma lies beside it, her legs and arms at odd angles, her black hair streamed in blood. Was it really not so long ago that they walked arm in arm and giggled secrets about village boys? Not far from her lies a hunter. For every one of them, there is a hunter. "Oh, sisters," says Moorina, "joined in eternity to these lost Dead, you have done a great service to your

people." There is no sign of the other hunters. The tents stand open and empty. Seal pelts are scattered among the corpses. She turns her head, groaning, and sees the stacks of seal towers are much smaller. She rolls over onto her back. Looks down at her body. Through the blood, both his and hers, she finds the source of her pain, a hole at her side dried to a scab of dark red. A blood flower that blossomed there and died. So cold. She reaches for a seal skin and pulls it across the dirt. She wraps herself in it and sleeps.

The Old One who had named her appears at her side. "It is so good to see you," says Moorina. "I want to stay with you." But the Old One shakes her head. "No. You are not one of us. Go." She pushes Moorina in the side, where the pain is.

Moorina wakes, groggy and bleary-eyed, in the field of death and flies. So, this is how it is, she thinks, I am alone. She wraps the seal skin tighter and stands on shaking legs. "I can't stay here. There is too much sad song."

The beach is empty. She scans the horizon. There are no boats. The hunters are gone. Is she to live like this, alone on this dead land? She walks to the water's edge, the seal pelt wrapped tight around her. "Oh family," she says, "it was not my hands that harmed you. It was not my voice." She bows her head. "I am more you than I was ever them," she says. She walks into the water. "The Dead will not take me. Will you?" She dives into the wave and is pulled down by the weight of skin. The salt burns her wound. She opens her mouth. In pain she swallows water.

Moorina feels her body change, stretch and expand to fill the seal's pelt. She kicks and it is a seal's flipper she kicks. The water no longer chokes her. She looks down and sees, not wounded skin, but a beautiful black seal stomach. She rises through the water, first her nose and then her face breaks through the wave and the sun shines down on her in a blue sky so clear she can see Seal Island, once her home, and now the place from which she is happy to have escaped. She opens her mouth and sings but the song is shortened by her own disgust. Moorina has found a new life but lost her old voice forever.

She dives into the water. I have given up everything, she thinks. Family. Friends. Home. My body, even. But this, this is just too much. I cannot live with such horrible song. She swims deeper and deeper, as if the ocean holds the levels of her despair. When she gets to the bottom, she

stops there and considers the option of wedging herself beneath a large rock. But even as she considers it, she swims away from this place to a destination that pulls at her from something deep inside. She swims and swims, until she can no longer see the island. Even this does not satisfy the urge. She dives into this strange new world of sea creatures and dangers she cannot define, still not certain if she cares to live or die. She knows she will not sing again. Fish swim by, and once she thinks she sees, at some distance, another seal, but she remains friendless. Days and nights pass, yet after all these changes she is not changed by them. She remains locked with indecision. Should she just let herself sink to the bottom? Instead of hiding behind the rock when the hungry shark swims past, should she swim to it? Life? Death? Neither, she thinks in despair, neither wants me.

She sees more and more seals, all swimming in the same direction as her. When one approaches, she rises through the water, now almost black with seals, and sees before her another island filled with them. No, she thinks, I cannot. But even as she decides to turn away, her body moves toward the crowded beach. For the first time she understands what a completely different creature she has become, pulled by tides, decided by body.

She presses through the crowd of seals. She does not want to know any of them. She lies in the sand, exhausted, falls asleep in spite of all their horrible noise.

She wakes to a new sensation, a strange pulling, pain, blood. Well, she thinks, so the hunters have returned after all. The pain is sharp but quick. She is ready to close her eyes when it stops and she feels the pulling at her teat. She looks down to see the baby seal sucking. Her mind reels in confusion. Is this the Hunter's child? She wants nothing to do with it. She pulls away. It cries, that horrible new seal song. Moorina moves away from it. She will go back to the water. She will direct her body with her own urges. Slowly Moorina moves down the crowded beach.

Another pup, unintended by its mother, cries. See, thinks Moorina, I am not the only one. She stops to look at the abandoned pup just in time to see the great bull, clumsy and huge, crawl over it, leaving a bloody, silent pulp.

Moorina looks quickly for her child. She hears its cry. The great bull, who does not even know the damage he has done, continues across the

beach, heading right toward it. The pup cries and cries. Moorina opens her mouth and sings. The pup turns toward her voice. She sings again and the pup moves toward her. It is hardly any distance at all but it is enough. The bull lumbers past.

Moorina drags her new, tired body through the mass of seals until she reaches her pup, who both cries and sings to her. She nuzzles the pup and it sucks from her greedily. It is a pleasant sensation, as is the wind on her face, the smell of salty sea, the sound of crashing waves. It isn't that she forgets, it's just that she lets herself be. Here. Who she is now. Seal. Keeper of song. \ddagger



"Could you use a Hellhound?"

Since he moved to New Orleans several years ago, Albert Cowdrey has found the Big Easy to be a cornucopia of material for fantasy stories, as the Foo dogs, graveyards, and stalkers of his recent contributions will attest. This new one ventures into the political arena. Anyone who has ever read All the King's Men knows that politics are different in the Crescent City, but surely they've never been this different—

The King of New Orleans

By Albert E. Cowdrey

WE WERE SITTING IN THE French Quarter one fine morning, my nephew Charlie and me, waiting impatiently for the ham and cheese croissants we had ordered for breakfast at the Authentic Old Creole Café.

The Vietnamese waiters were hustling as only they can hustle, but the crowd was big and they were falling behind. There were the usual people—the French Quarter characters in their leather and feathers, plus the respectables who were calmly reading their *Times-Picayunes* and would ignore the Elephant Man if he happened to lurch in, which, I believe, he occasionally does. And there were tourists of all sorts, jamming the aisles and asking questions through their noses and calling croissants crescents.

Charlie, who is young but stodgy and lives Uptown, looked around him and stated pompously that New Orleans had never been as full of obnoxious strangers as at present.

Listen, Charlie, I said, the strangers of today may well be the fellow

citizens of tomorrow. They just got to get settled in. I ever tell you about the time I met our weirdest visitor ever?

No, he said, rolling his eyes up to the fancy tilework in the ceiling, because he knew he was going to get a long story. So I'm into my anecdoteage, so what? I admit it. And besides, I was paying for the food.

It was a long generation ago, I began, when I was working for Tiny Sulla, the boss of the 38th Ward. Election time was coming and I was driving the sound truck and doing odd jobs, and let me assure you that many of the political jobs I did for him were extremely odd.

Well, one afternoon about quarter of six I drove back through the slum — the whole ward was, and is, a slum — past the little wooden building that housed the Fire-Baptized Church of God in Christ, where a clutter of old cars signaled that a meeting was in progress. I turned into the driveway of Tiny Sulla's big, comfortable house and parked the sound truck — actually an old Studebaker with a big horn on top — behind his mile-long tailfin '59 Cad. From the car alone, you had no trouble figuring that Tiny was in politics.

I marched inside and demanded my pay, twenty bucks for a long, hard day spent disturbing the peace with amplified bombast. Tiny rose reluctantly from his easy chair and grabbed his stick and limped toward me, free hand on wallet. What a sight he was, even for a politician. A human blimp half crippled by polio, he went around on three legs, the third being that thick, straight stick. His walk featured alternate half orbits of his formidable rump around the stick, first right, then left, kicking his stiff legs forward in turn.

He drew out his fat alligator wallet very slowly, because he hated above all to part with money.

"Miss Trish was heah oilier," he said, winking. "For a few bucks I could fix you up if you want. You could loin a lot from her, Joey. Even I loin something."

He talked in the true accent of the ward, like Bugs Bunny on Prozac. The chief businesses of the 38th in those days were prostitution and theft (drugs came later). Tiny was well served by both. On the theft end, he was a fence, buying and storing and eventually reselling everything from kitchen appliances to the complete regalia of Rex, King of Carnival, which a local burglar had acquired in the course of business and which now reposed in Tiny's walk-in, double-locked closet.

On the prostitution end, he had worked out an arrangement with a hooker called Miss Trish for the cheapest service I ever heard of, even in those simple times: Two bucks for three fucks. (As he said, "exactly 66 2/3 cents per each.") Tiny Sulla lived in heaven, except for being crippled. He got a cut of everything that went down in Ward 38 and I was willing to bet he paid practically no taxes on it. In spite of that, he was not what you could call generous. In fact he was tight as hell.

I said firmly, "I just want my money, Mr. Sulla."

He sighed and extracted from a thick wad of bills one ten and two fives. Then he did what he always did: gave me the money, and just as my fingers closed on it, jerked back a five.

"Campaign expenses," he grinned, put it back in his wallet, and returned the wallet to his hip pocket. The five was a deduct, pronounced dee duck, and he finished the daily ritual of doing me out of a quarter of my pay by saying, "Dee duck is flying."

At this moment the phone rang. I answered it, saying, "Mr. Sulla's residence," and a semi-hysterical voice demanded Tiny, so I carried it over to him.

"So you got problems," he said into the phone. "Yeah, yeah, I unnerstand what you saying. Me and Remy and Guido. Yeah. The mayor," he said, hanging up. "Asshole's got some problem so he calls his only friends got brains and we have to go downtown and solve it for him."

Tiny was referring to Police Superintendant Remy Dorque and Guido Cantalabria, who was capo of the whole Mafia in the New Orleans Metropolitan Area.

"Sounds like a high-level meeting," I ventured.

"Say that again," said Tiny, comfortably aware of his status. "Come on, I'll drop you off at that dump where you live at."

We stepped out of the house into a dusk that was redolent of broken drains. Tiny's big Cad was standing wide open with the keys in the ignition. It stood like that all the time and nobody ever stole it. One reason was a looming shadow leaning against the end of the house, a shadow named Tarpoleon.

Tarp was a black guy, six and a half feet tall, close to three hundred pounds. He had small bloodshot eyes in a face seamed with razor scars. His claim to fame rested on a fight at a local ginmill. Tarpoleon lost the first

round, went home, got a hand grenade from a supply he kept in his bedroom, came back, threw the grenade into the saloon and held the heavy door shut while it exploded, perforating two people with fragments, rupturing a bunch of eardrums, and destroying fifty-seven bottles of liquor and a big blue mirror.

Of course Tarp was sent to Angola, but Tiny Sulla, deeply impressed by his feat, bribed the Pardon Review Board to send him back, an officially rehabilitated member of society. Since then Tarpoleon had killed a number of people, or so the local gossip said, but only when Tiny told him to.

Tiny took a long time getting settled in the driver's seat of the Cad and fiddling with his hand controls. He ground the starter for quite a few minutes until he became convinced that his battery was dead. Finally he leaned through the window into the humid night.

"Hey Tarp," he shouted, "go over by the choich and get me a battery, okay?"

Tarpoleon sauntered off into the darkness and about ten minutes later returned, carrying a battery, which he put into the Cad.

"Now take the dead battery and put it in whoever's car you got the good one out of," said Tiny. "I hate loose ends."

We roared away into the darkness.

IN THOSE DAYS the Quarter, where I lived, was an incredible mixture of elegance and squalor. My building had been a mansion in 1798, but now it was cut up into forty little apartments, plus an antique shop, a store that sold mammy dolls and stuffed alligators, and an outlet for Cuban pornography.

The gate to the patio was rusty iron lace with iron trees and iron fruit being pecked by iron birds and except for the rust it looked like it led into Buckingham Palace. The patio had run to seed but it was still beautiful, with banana trees heavy with hard green fruit and a huge white oleander that overhung the wall like a nebula. An old French fountain tinkled away, rain or shine.

Nobody seeing only the gate and the patio would think I lived in a kind of cave that maybe had been a storeroom once, or a stable, or a

dungeon for disobedient slaves. My bathroom was two flights up and best used in the dark, if you didn't want to disgust yourself. The cave was my pad. Most of the time I loved it.

When I opened the door, however, a roach as long as my thumb was walking over the dirty dishes in my sink. He gave me the shivers; I have a thing about crawlies. I hit him with a squirt of DDT — it didn't cause cancer yet in those days — and he immediately ran up to the ceiling and started flying back and forth from wall to wall, wings beating madly. I walked outside and smoked a cigarette — they didn't cause cancer yet either, in those days — and stirred only when a neighbor yelled that I was wanted on the house phone in the upstairs hall. It was Tiny Sulla.

"Where the hell you been at?" he demanded. "Go outside and wait. Tarp will pick you up in five minutes. He's bringing me some supplies and Miss Trish."

"What's happening, Mr. Sulla?"

"Shit is what's happening. Remy and Guido is both dead and" (a word followed that sound like *digested*) "and I need every pair of hands, Joey, even yours."

Bang went the phone. I returned bemused to my apartment. I didn't want to go back in because the roach might still be alive, or at least kicking, so I shut my door, a massive oak door with 18th-century ironwork, and locked the padlock that was our century's contribution to the security of my dwelling. Then I hastened through the iron lace gates into Royal Street and leaned against the wall to wait for Tarp.

I remember the air was sweet-sour with the fragrance of a neighborhood brewery and little lamps twinkled in the windows of the antique shop, and an endless stream of cars crept by winking their brake lights and braying at one another. Then the Studebaker appeared, nosed over to the curb, and I hopped in.

"What's happening?" I asked Tarp breathlessly but he only growled at me. Miss Trish was in the back, smoking, and I asked her, too. She shrugged.

"Tiny never tells me nothing except get undressed," she said.

A motorcycle cop picked us up as we crossed Canal Street, turned on his siren and led us at breakneck speed through the evening traffic. We swung into a street uptown near Coliseum Square and squealed to a stop

behind an impressive line of cars — Tiny's Cad and a couple of big black limos. One was a stretch limo so long that it just faded away into the darkness.

Tarp jumped out and opened the trunk. We took out a couple of big cardboard boxes. They were bulky but light to carry and we made our way up onto the shadowy porch of a big, six-columned mansion where all the wooden shutters were tightly closed and other cops were standing guard in the dim light emanating from a door with etched crystal insets.

One of the cops opened the door and we stumbled into an entrance hall that must have been twenty feet high. The light came from a chandelier that was a forest of milky antique globes. I had a distinct feeling that everything I could hope to earn in the next ten years would not buy one of the gorgeously uncomfortable-looking chairs that stood against the walls.

Another door at the end of the hall opened and a rotund, heavily tanned little Frenchman glided out, pushing thin strands of hair over his semibald dome. I knew I was looking at Edouard LeMoyne (Sweet Eddie) Louver, who had been mayor of New Orleans for most of my short life.

"You brung the stuff, I see, yeah, yeah," he said. Tiny waddled out behind him and the mayor turned to him in something like desperation. Lowering his voice, he said, "Tiny, you gotta get me outa this one. I'm a never forget if you do."

Tiny was all business, saying only, "You guys have a seat, we're having us a conference inside."

He and the mayor disappeared through the door and it shut behind them. We set the boxes down and I sat gingerly on one priceless chair while Tarp flopped in another and hung his leg over the arm. He brought out a pint flask of cheap wine from pockets that seemed to have room for everything, and I asked for a gulp and he gave it to me. It was the chummiest I had ever gotten with a killer, up to that time.

"Come on, Tarp. What the hell is going on?" I asked in a subdued voice, not quite whispering. He shook his head.

"I don' know who the guy is causin' all the trouble," he said. "There was shootin' earlier, thass all I know. Mr. Sulla, he was all shook up when he call me an' say, Tarp, bring me bring such and such and so and so and git your ass in gear."

At this point the door opened and Tiny grunted for Tarp and me to come in and bring the boxes.

I don't have the slightest recollection of what the room looked like except that it was enormous. All I remember is what was in the middle of it, squatting on, and almost covering, a medium-sized Persian rug.

"This," said Tiny, "is Mr. Mo."

"Gawwwwwd," said Tarp and then fell silent, gaping.

I was looking at Mr. Mo but I was not sure if he was looking at me. His eyes were on the sides of his head and they rotated independently, like the eyes of a chameleon. One seemed to contemplate me for a while but maybe not.

Tiny tried to put everybody in the picture.

"This gentleman was on his way from someplace a long ways off," he explained, "to some other place also a long ways off, when he happened to drop in to New Orleans. A tourist, you might say. Well, you know how it is. We get these visitors now and then, come for a day, stay for a lifetime. It's a tribute to the charm of our city. Mr. Mo wants to stay, and he has made it clear that he expects the red carpet treatment and will do incredible things if he don't get it."

"He wants to be king," Mayor Louver explained in a miserable tone of voice, as if he had a bad case of flu.

"King?"

"Yeah," said Tiny. "King. They have city states where he comes from. He wants to be king of New Orleans."

Mr. Mo had been sitting somewhat in the posture of a bullfrog, with his front paws or flippers turned in and his back legs folded. He was iridescent all over, like he had been rubbed with oil. His body was bulbous and covered with little twinkling pointed nodules like the heads of fancy upholstery tacks. His head was covered with horny-looking plates and he had an abundance of natural spines and hooks on his legs. His mouth was enormous. He was not pretty to look at, but every eye was on him.

Tarp asked the obvious question: "What's he gonna do if he don't get to be king?"

At this moment Mr. Mo proved that he had one other froglike characteristic. Something whipped out of his big lipless mouth — it moved so fast I never saw exactly what it was — and a little antique table

across the room was gone. Maybe he swallowed it; maybe his spit was antimatter and it disintegrated. Anyway, it was gone.

"That's the least of what he can do," said Mayor Louver, running a wet palm over his sweating dome. "I might add that police officers have pumped bullets into him and they just go through without causing any damage to speak of. Those police officers will soon be memorialized with full departmental honors. I intend to give the eulogy myself."

"WANT BE KING," growled Mr. Mo, making me jump. He sounded like a concrete mixer churning.

"You will be," said Tiny hastily. "Whatever you want, sir, you will for sure get it. How about something right now? How about a bowl of gumbo or a woman? Joey, go and get Miss Trish."

"WOO-MUN," said Mr. Mo.

"Does he, uh, like women?" I asked.

"What, you think he's not normal?"

I went out and brought in Miss Trish, who was smoking a cigarette.

"Oh shit," she said.

"Now, now, now," said Tiny. "I'm sure he won't want to do anything we didn't do sometime."

"I ain't screwing no animal," she said. "I ain't done that for years."

"WANT BE KING," grumbled Mr. Mo, reverting to his original idea, and his mouth went flick and an ornate, yard-high Chinese vase vanished.

"Good Christ, that thing cost me \$3000," said Mayor Louver. "He eats a cop, I can get another cop, but some of this furniture is priceless."

"Ahem," said Tiny. "His honor has asked me to take charge of this problem. He selected me for the job after losing two of his most valued associates, Chief of Police Remy Dorque and Guido Cantalabria, both of whom went where the furniture disappeared to, wherever that is."

"They were upstanding citizens," said the mayor, looking ready to cry. "It's account of Remy that I'm going to give the eulogy. It's so sad there ain't anything to bury. Guido's memorial service will be conducted by Archbishop Rummage in St. Louis Cathedral."

"You guys," Tiny resumed, "open those boxes you brung in."

As we were obeying, Tiny said conversationally to Mr. Mo, "So how was your trip, sir? Poisonally, I hate to travel."

The boxes contained the regalia of Rex, King of Carnival. There was

a satin cape and a crown full of rhinestones, a scepter with rhinestones, a pair of white gloves, a mask set with more rhinestones, a tunic full of glitter and what looked like fancy silk drawers covered with sequins.

"These, sir," said Tiny grandly, "are the official vestments of the King of New Orleans and we are going to clothe you in them right heah and now."

The whole collection glittered and winked and flashed and Mr. Mo fixed first one eye and then the other on the regalia with, I hoped, approval.

"Joey," said Tiny, "you hand the stuff one article at a time to the mayor. Ed, you present it — don't just hand it, *present* it — to Mr. Mo. Tarp, you and Miss Trish help Mr. Mo into his gear. Trish, take that goddamn cigaroony out your mouth. Suppose he don't like Kents, you want to lose your head?"

So right there in the mayor's parlor we held Mr. Mo's coronation. It went slowly. First of all, nothing fit; the fancy drawers wouldn't go on at all because they were Size 40 and Mr. Mo was more like Size 100, if not more. As for the mask, forget it; the eye-holes were an inch apart, and Mr. Mo's eyes were roughly a yard apart. The crown wouldn't stay on his head until Miss Trish borrowed a switchblade knife that Tarp happened to have in one of his deep pockets and cut an elastic strap off some undergarment she was wearing and used it to tie the crown on.

The cape fit perfectly. Mr. Mo had trouble at first holding the scepter, because he didn't have opposable thumbs, exactly. But when he got his suckers on it they held it firmly. You could see by the way he clutched it that he liked the feel of kingship.

We all bowed deeply except Tiny, who couldn't. Tiny raised his stick and shouted, "Hail to the King!" at the top of his lungs, and Mr. Mo looked pompous, just like a king or a toad generally does, because he was both, sort of.

"And now, your majesty," Tiny resumed, "we are going to take you to your palace. No," he said in answer to a growl from Mr. Mo, "this place heah ain't grand enough for you. This heah is just soivant's quarters. Ed Louver is your soivant, and it's good enough for him. For you we have an ancient mansion all ready, with food and drink and broads and whatever the hell you want, oh incredible one."

So we all paraded out, Mr. Mo lurching, Tiny rotating, the rest of us

scuffling along. The cops waiting on the porch were muttering, "Jesus X. Christ!" as we passed. We stowed Mr. Mo with some difficulty in the stretch limo that had formerly belonged to Guido Cantalabria. Since Guido's driver had gone to the same place as his employer, the mayor called one of the cops down and ordered him to be Mr. Mo's driver.

The cop moaned but obeyed. I noticed that he was careful to raise the glass shield between himself and his passenger and I wondered how much protection that would be if Mr. Mo happened to get pissed at something. Or simply hungry.

We didn't bother with Tiny's Cad or the Studebaker; all the rest of us piled into a second limo, belonging to the mayor, with me in the driver's seat because His Honor's usual driver had run away screaming at some point in the evening's festivities. Tarp sat up front with me and Miss Trish sat on a jumpseat in back, facing the two political bigwigs.

"Where do we go?" I asked, starting up the biggest, purringest motor I had ever set key to. Regarding my state of mind, I might say that I seemed to be floating, whether from alcohol or fatigue or stress I don't know. Yet I was beginning to have an inkling of the fact that Tiny Sulla knew what he was doing. He was a man with a plan, and for the first time in our acquaintance I was beginning to develop respect for him.

"Your place," said Tiny. "That goddamn cave you live in, Joey."

Long past asking questions, I swung smoothly away from the curb, and the limo with Mr. Mo in it followed us. On the way Tiny told us what we were going to do next.

ROYAL STREET, midnight. The same traffic, so that I had to pull the limo half up on the sidewalk to park. The cop driving the stretch job followed. When we piled out, Mr. Mo stopped at Fabacher's Antiques to gaze at himself in a Victorian pier glass standing just inside the show window. I guess he liked what he saw, incredible as that seemed to the rest of us, because he didn't eat anything or anybody. A couple of passersby glanced at him, and one said to another, "Some Quarter character."

I swung open the squeaking wrought-iron gates and we all paraded into the patio, me leading because I knew the way, and Tarp and Miss Trish bringing up the rear holding Mr. Mo's cape off the ground like it was

a bridal train. I unlocked the big wooden door of my hovel and stepped back, and Mayor Louver stepped back, and Tiny murmured to Mr. Mo, "Enter upon your palace, your majesty."

Mr. Mo stepped inside, noted I guess that it wasn't a palace, and began to growl.

Then Tiny lurched up to the plate, swinging his big stick like a baseball bat, and smacked the monster on the back. Mr. Mo stumbled a step or two further into the darkness. Tarp was coming up, pulling a hand grenade from his pocket, and he jerked out the pin with his teeth and tossed the grenade between Mr. Mo's webbed feet and slammed the door again and held it shut. I hit the ground with a thump; Tiny staggered against the wall beside the door, clawing at the brickwork because whacking Mr. Mo had unbalanced him. As for Miss Trish, she just ran screeching out of the gate.

There was a tremendous impact I felt in my teeth and the big old oak Spanish door jumped against Tarp's arms and some fragments of steel punched through and went humming across the patio like big roaches in flight. One of them smacked Tarp upside the head and he reeled back. Fortunately, a couple of inches of heart oak had slowed the fragment down but still it must have felt like a nine-pound maul when it smacked him. He stood there bleeding lavishly, then shook his head, dragged out a big dirty handkerchief, and started dabbing at his skull.

For a few seconds nothing much happened. People in the upstairs apartments were screaming, was it an explosion in the brewery, was it an earthquake, etc. Meanwhile the door to my pad was opening slowly by itself, swinging out and releasing a hideous burnt smell like a fire of old truck tires. In the darkness inside little fires glowed and winked out under a deep dark cloud of smoke and dust that slowly surged and billowed out into the courtyard.

It must have been a good five minutes before the smoke dispersed somewhat and our eyes adjusted and we could begin to see the dim outlines of the wreck inside my pad. Tiny and Mayor Louver and I stood looking in, stupefied; I think Tarp was still mostly stunned. Trish had reappeared, curious to see what had happened, and she tied up Tarp's head with some more of her underwear, his handkerchief being pretty well soaked.

Then, still curious, she took out a cheap cigarette lighter and approached the door.

"He's dead, right?" she whispered.

"Dead and gone," I assured her, because in fact Mr. Mo had vanished, evaporated, ceased to be. I couldn't see anything left of him except a few rhinestones, winking amid the rubble.

Trish crept in and I followed her like a hypnotized man. The air inside was still bad, but after another minute the lighter burned with a steady blue flame. I don't think I ever saw any place that was more thoroughly destroyed. It was awesome. There wasn't a Chianti bottle left unshattered or a package of Trojans left unpunctured. The whole of my young life was in ruins.

Miss Trish whispered, "Joey, I don't think you can live here no more."

I was starting to agree with her when something fell on my hand and I brushed it off. Then something else fell on my head, and something squirmed under my foot and Miss Trish screamed.

I tell you, Charlie, some things I've seen I wouldn't want to see again. My first thought was that every roach in the Quarter had invaded my pad and was advancing on me. Things were crawling all over, coming down the walls, dropping off the ceiling, migrating across the floor. But it wasn't roaches. It was pieces of Mr. Mo, reassembling.

The pieces moved with kind of a humping motion. You ever see a migration of woollyworm caterpillars crossing the road? It was liked that, except the pieces were glistening and oily instead of furry. Miss Trish and I tripped over each other twice getting out of there.

Yeah, I ran. I admit it. I have a thing about roaches and other crawlies. When just one was flying around my apartment, I got the hell out. After what I had seen, my nerve broke. If it was any comfort, Mayor Louver and Miss Trish and even Tarpoleon were running too. It was the greatest display of mass cowardice since July 1861, when the U.S. Congress departed the battlefield of Bull Run at a gallop.

Poor old crippled Tiny Sulla was left behind to get away as best he could before Mr. Mo reintegrated and started asking him questions, like: is this how you treat your king? Suffice it to say there wasn't time. So there was another name for the memorial service, and Mayor Louver had to add a paragraph to his eulogy. It was sad about Tiny; not only was I just starting

to respect him, his going meant the end of my political career. Within a week I was working for a living.

So that's your story, Charlie said, sourly. He was plainly incredulous.

Still, he didn't get up and storm out. He waved to let John Nguyen, who owns the Authentic Old Creole Café, know he wanted another cup of coffee as well as a croissant, but the crowd was such that he seemed as unlikely to get one as the other.

Then Charlie started to grill me.

Tell me this, he demanded. Why didn't this Mr. Mo, the toad creature from Dimension X, destroy the city of New Orleans in revenge? Why are we sitting here at this minute in an undisturbed French Quarter full of living, breathing sleaze and eight million *turistas*?

Mayor Louver, I replied, sent Tarp to apologize to Mr. Mo and tell him the assassination attempt was all Tiny's doing and offer to make him leader of the 38th Ward. After all, the position was vacant anyway. Tarp wasn't eaten because Tiny Sulla was such a tremendous din that Mr. Mo had no capacity left. Or maybe he was afraid of being blown up again. Anyway, he listened.

Tarp said later he told Mr. Mo that we don't have kings and that ward boss was as near to absolute power as he could get under the existing political system. So Mr. Mo took over down there; he was highly intelligent, learned the ropes, and soon began vending hot merchandise and lying and cheating like he was born to it.

He also inherited Miss Trish. I have no idea what those two did when they were alone together, and I don't even want to think about it, but he paid her a lot better than Tiny had ever done and in time she was able to stop answering the whims of every creature that came along and go into business for herself. Today she has several 900 numbers and a stable of young people with Southern Comfort voices who offer telephone sex at four bucks a minute. She also owns a collection of thousand-dollar genuine-hair blonde wigs and a boy toy with whom she winters in Bermuda.

Mr. Mo, I went on, also needed somebody to guide and assist him while he was learning his new job, so Tarp got his old position back. When Mr. Mo decided to retire and enjoy life on this planet, Tarp took over the

ward. It was time the 38th had a black leader anyway, and Tarp was no worse or better than the two monsters who had preceded him. He ran things much the old way until he became involved in the heroin traffic, which since Tiny's time had developed into a major industry of the 38th. That's a dangerous business, as you know, and poor old Tarp died in a hail of bullets apparently fired by gunmen sent by Apollo Corso, who succeeded Guido as the local godfather.

Tarp wasn't buried from St. Louis Cathedral, but the Fire-Baptized Church of God in Christ gave him a hell of a sendoff, and Mayor Detour, who had taken over the city by then, delivered the eulogy.

I suppose, said Charlie irrelevantly, that today nobody runs the 38th; the gangs just fight over the crack trade, and nobody's in charge.

Nobody except the twelve-year-old hitmen, I said. It's called progress.

And where, asked Charlie, still deeply skeptical, is Mr. Mo today?

Right over there, I said, enjoying my punchline. He's sitting in the corner trying to catch a waiter like the rest of us. See who I mean? The big guy with the *Times-Picayune*? He's sitting behind the two hookers and the guy dressed like a chicken, across from the voodoo queen and just to the left of the transvestites.

Good Christ, said Charlie, staring. He is strange. Even in the Quarter, you'd think somebody would notice him.

He keeps a low profile these days, I said. Eats Creole food instead of Creoles, gets photographed a lot on Mardi Gras, won a prize for his costume four or five years running. I mean, he's joined the community, he's accepted our standards. It was seeing him over there that started me telling you this story.

By the way, I added. He calls himself Mr. Meaux today. It's the French influence. Look, he's putting down his paper. I bet he's tired of waiting for breakfast, and he's about to get a croissant for himself. Watch this!

Wow! said Charlie. Talk about self-service!

At this point John Nguyen rushed up with our breakfasts, apologizing for the long wait.

It's all these tourists, he said. We don't mean to, but they get in the way and we shortchange our regulars.

Take it easy, John, I told him. Any luck, some of the tourists will be regulars, too, in time. That's how a community grows. ☺

Frederic Durbin grew up in rural Illinois, where he says he spent a lot of time climbing trees and avoiding shoes. He lives in Japan nowadays and teaches English and creative writing at Niigata University. His short fiction has appeared in Cricket magazine and his first novel, Dragonfly, was a finalist for the International Horror Guild Award. "The Place of Roots" is a dense and astonishing work.

The Place of Roots

By Frederic S. Durbin

KIRITH HAD NOT BEEN MEANT to ride the wind: I was sure of it. All living things must ride it someday, the Loreweavers said. The old and the sick rode the wind, as did the great yellow leaves in the dry season when their edges frayed and they could no longer hold onto the limbs; but Kirith had been my age, barely grown to adulthood.

We saw the wind take her, as she crossed the vine bridge toward us from that slender, leaning trunk which people call the Gray Dawn. It was the Quiet Wind that pulled her through the vines; not any of the soft or raging sideways breezes that can be felt on the skin. It was the Quiet Wind, the one that blows forever downward, in the crownglades and flathomes, indoors and out, silent and absolutely unceasing.

She did not choose to ride it. Her screams, her stretching arms told us that. One moment she had been moving forward at a quick bridgestride, strong brown feet curled to grip the swaying rungs; the next, she was whirling, crashing through woven shade canopies, diminishing in the blue-green vaults below. Dust filtered down, flashing in afternoon rays.

For a long time after she was gone, none of us could speak. We could only stare after her.

The Quiet Wind had taken my flute once, when my age was no more than seven or eight sun-seasons. I remembered how the wind stole it from the fork where I had propped it, and how I watched it roll and bounce away, never to be returned; and how I had wept for it, for no flute is exactly like any other. That was how the wind bore Kirith away.

I kept silence while the people mourned for her as they would for an old one, a sick one. It was a strange sending, for there was no still, sleeping body to wrap in leaves and give to the wind; this time the wind had not received, but taken. I sat on the broken bridge, in the chilly shade of the twisted, leaning Gray Dawn. Listening to the mourning songs, I peered down through the jagged hole into the misty void, where sunlight slanted pale and faltering, where leaf upon leaf hid that impossibly distant Place of Roots, to which even most of the Loreweavers had never been.

I touched the shattered rungs, rubbed my thumb over the sun faded ends that had given way. They were as yielding as the dry grasses that grew from bark — left too long without replacing, overlooked, since this was a little-traveled path beside a stouter mainway. Worms had eaten the wood in places; I saw the circling, haphazard grooves they had bored on the rungs' undersides.

Kirith was gone from her flathome because of forgotten maintenance, because of worms. It had not been her time. There was no rightness in this, no harmony, and I had no peace. Even when the last sending song's echoes had vanished, when children laughed again and harvesters clambered over the trellises and arbors with their knives, I thought of her, and of the family we might have raised together. I broke off branches, hurled them as far as I could upward across the glades, watched as that unfelt downward stream took each one. "Our mothers teach us to fear you," I said to the Quiet Wind. "Nothing that has breath may be given to you. What belongs to you is that from which breath is gone. Why have you taken what was not yet yours?"

The wise ones told me, "Kirith is happier now." Even her mothers said so. "She is in the Glades of the Sun, where there is no wind at all, where fruit ripens in every season and need not be tended. The dreams that rise from the Place of Roots to trouble our sleep never rise there."

I considered the wise Loreweavers' words; I tried to imagine Kirith in the Other Trees, light falling golden on her hair. The dry season came with its yellowing, with its lengthening and splitting of pods. In turn, the seed season filled the air with uncountable soft, drifting tufts, each a seed that would nestle in a fork or on a broad, mossy branch and become another trunk. Rains came next, sometimes whispering, sometimes roaring, washing the new leaves to gleam in another season of sun. But Kirith was not here to make garlands of the earliest white flowers, those that glistened in the cool hollows of the old, wind-eaten trunks.

Pushing my face close to one such dim grotto, I remembered the rotten rungs of the bridge. There were worms here, too, devouring the wood, their fat bodies wriggling in the pulp that was no longer wood. This season the worms angered me, and I did that which I had never done, nor ever seen done by anyone: I crushed them under my hands, grinding them into the hard wall, painting the rough bark with the soft slime they became. Then I fell to the moss, my arms slick to the elbows with the horror of that which no one had ever done. In the stillness of the ancient Evening Fork, the vast trunks of Day and Night rising on either side of me, I heard Kirith's voice in the splash of the stream, in the sighing of moss curtains. And I could not tell whether she sang, faint and far away, or whether she wept.

When I rose, my limbs stiff and aching, I knew what I must do. I must follow the Quiet Wind in the direction it had carried her. If she was lost in the Place of Roots far below, unable to climb the trunks, then I must find her. No one, I was sure, would give me a blessing for such a journey; not to that sun-forsaken region from which the night's visions crept.

So on the next morning of gathering, when each with his or her basket would range far from the flatomes in search of the ripening longfruit, I stuffed my belt's pouch with nuts, dried berry cakes, and sweet grasses, enough for a climb of several days. I circled away from my brothers, following the hub of bound branches past the Vineglade and Voss's Fence. Beyond sight of the others, I wedged my basket in an old restfork, where seats polished by generations of passersby lay cradled in aromatic bowers of starbloom.

Then I descended. Hand over hand, by vines, by overgrown trellises, by the steps cut in mighty boles, I departed from the airy realm. The leaves became fewer as I went down — fewer and darker, larger, like heavy cloaks

abandoned on hooked limbs. To sleep, I shared the knothole cave of a twitching silicus, his beard grown long and tangled. He raised drooping eyelids to regard me, then rolled to his other side, covered his face with twiggy paws, and continued his fidgeting slumber. Night fell darker here, where starlight did not penetrate, where the moon peered for the briefest span through a gap high above.

Morning was scarcely brighter, a gray suffusion of the vaults, boldening only to a somber twilit blue at noon. The last leaves gave place to oily vines, their ominous loops thicker than four people could join hands around. There were no steps or carvings here; I made my way by braided trunks, by the natural stairways of arches upon arches. Always I was mindful of the Quiet Wind, which tugged at my ankles on the slippery paths, threatening to pluck me from the trees and make me ride. The fragrance of new growth was gone, and all the world seemed damp, dripping, and tainted. Worms must be here, writhing and chewing beneath every surface. That night I shivered in the open, unwilling to clamber inside any of the odorous holes, afraid of what might lurk in their depths. I scarcely slept, listening to the ticking and scratching of creatures I could not see, things for which I knew no names.

The next dawn was no dawn at all, but the merest paling of the gloom that just allowed me to pick a creeping course down trunks so massive I could hardly see any curve to the faces. Their ravaged walls peeled in out-thrust runners large as platforms, the route faintly lighted by glowing, bulbous growths. Some shelves let my feet plunge through, left me dangling waist deep in bark above the void. Half-glimpsed shapes of unsettling lengths and proportions scuttled away from me, and a dank humidity arose to soak my garments. Vapors formed a hedge so solid that the sounds of my breathing bounced back loud.

Near the journey's end, when my head spun with weariness and the all-pervading stench, the descent became easier. What I supposed at first to be enormous limbs shot out from the boles, dove in sprawling nets of chaos into a mire of blackness. As I eased gratefully onto the uppermost of these sloping paths, I realized the livid carpet beneath me was the endless flat surface from which all trees grow, and that I stood upon those anchoring nether appendages of the trees themselves. I had come to the Place of Roots.

Lower I hurried now, slipping from root to root, floundering through brakes of sickly shining hooded stalks, lower and lower, until the midnight morass rose to meet me, until I came level with the grotesque caves beneath the roots.

Glinting in the pallid light on every side, under every tree marching away into oblivion, rose jumbled mounds of whitish branches...branches, I thought, and yet nowhere could I see any of a form or texture I knew. They linked together, interlocked, some fastened at the ends by gray or brownish cords. I crept to the edge of the nearest heap, overwhelmed by its size. Here, in the first such mound alone, lay more of these age-old things than there were leaves in the crown of the Noon Trunk itself. Some were no longer than my fingers, brittle, porous in places like a rotting twig, hard overall, but soft and dark at the core. Some were large as young trunks, four times my height, dry and rough, half-buried in the muck of seasons unnumbered. But what trunk could produce such bizarre limbs, and why were they gathered here, clutched by the roots of the trees that held our flathomes?

Crawling lower, I circled a third of the great stack, staring into the bars and cracked fragments of its impenetrable shadows. Somehow, I knew, the secrets of the Quiet Wind lay hidden here, locked in the embrace of these shards. Ridiculously, I thought that if I could squirm my way to the center, I might find the flute snatched from me so long before, and finding it, perhaps I would understand.

As I poked and prodded, a sharp length came away, clattered across my foot. I lifted it, turned it in the wan light: a crooked piece bent like my elbow, only curved and flat. On its inner edge grew a strange row of squarish knobs — no, not grown there, but embedded.

Recoiling with a shock of awareness, I lost my footing and sat down hard on the root, nearly dropping the branch. The squared knobs, I suddenly saw, were teeth. Teeth like my own, but these were larger than my fist. What sort of tree, I asked myself in growing dread, *sprouts teeth as its fruit?*

I flung the object away, watched it plummet with a soft, liquid sound into the mire below, and lie trapped, a splash of yellow-white against the black. Wiping my hands on my sodden shirt, revulsed at the touch of the tooth-branch, I looked around at the lumpish growths that glowed, at the roots ascending to the trunks. This was the end of all descents, where the

Quiet Wind brought all things it stole — and where its power ended, for here there was no lower place; here, growing things started their laborious journeys toward the sky.

When I gazed again into the white branches, I cried out, leapt to my feet: now I saw faces peering out at me. Hard faces they were, dry and white like the teeth and branches, yet unmistakably faces; these were of the same size as mine, though their eyes were empty holes, their noses hollow pits, and they had neither ears nor hair. Yet the teeth...the teeth might have been mine, or those of anyone in the flathomes. Here and there the faces leered out of the pile, though none spoke or moved. None, I saw, had bodies, and with relief I told myself these were not real people at all, but things made, like the husk dolls with which children played.

Then a whisper passed among the roots behind me; something stirred in the stagnant world. I turned, and in my exhaustion, in the unreasoning hope that had brought me to this place, I half expected to see Kirith floundering toward me. Her hair would shimmer even here with the sunlight that clung to her wherever she went. She would call to me, dance over the mud; I would catch her in my arms, and our laughter would ring from the meaningless white branches. The hollow-eyed faces in the roots would watch us climb together.

But it was not Kirith that loomed monstrous over the roots. Tipping back my head, I watched a gyring shape rise higher and higher, a bloated, branchless trunk, horribly segmented and soft — a tremendous worm. Ropes of ooze trailed from its belly. It squirmed with slick, sucking noises, its weight shuddering the wood. Up, down, in hideous spirals, the beast insinuated itself through the root-caves, through the stacked white branches, which tumbled and rattled away from its thrusting, eyeless head. Its wrinkled flesh exuded the very fetor that had brought my dizziness, that permeated all this rotting gulf.

Shrinking, half-fainting, I pressed myself into a hollow as the plunging mouth — a circular pit, lined with knife-teeth — fed on the white branches, on the tree roots, on anything it encountered. I shrieked, heedless of discovery, covering my eyes and ears.

When I raised my head, the thing had quested past, length by rippling length, to other stacks. Still I could hear its ponderous pounding, its slithering wetness, and still I choked on the air it had defiled.

I recall little of my upward journey; only that, before I climbed the trunks, I shouted Kirith's name until my voice failed, and that I searched long among the silent mounds.

Now I am old, and soon I will join Kirith in the Glades of the Sun. I know she waits for me there; my heart is at ease since I learned she is not lost and wandering in the dark abyss. I have been a Loreweaver myself, singing of light and beauty, watching seasons change. Seeds, rain, sun, and drying, the forest renews itself, its music unceasing. But I understand, too, why the Loreweavers speak little when the night wind rages in storms, making the limbs twist with deep groans. There is wisdom in silence, and they find the greatest peace who do not climb too far seeking truth; for behind every answer lies a greater mystery. My journeys are finished now, save one. When my breath is gone, I will be wrapped in leaves and ride the Quiet Wind, borne away amid the sending songs. I will not linger in that place where the vast, colorless worm gnaws at the roots of all that we are and know. ☠



*"My fantasy is that my wool will be made into
a sweater worn by Nicole Kidman."*



SCIENCE

BEN BOVA

SEX IN SPACE

HAS ANYONE made love in space? Both the Russian space station, Mir, and the American space shuttle have had crews of mixed genders aboard. Some of the shuttle missions have gone longer than a week. Many of the Mir crews have been in orbit for months at a time.

Has nature taken its course, up there in orbital space?

Neither the Russian nor the American space agencies will admit that there have been sexual encounters aboard their spacecraft. The chances are there haven't been — yet. The Mir space station is small, cramped, and cluttered with equipment. The space shuttle's living area is crowded. Neither Mir nor the shuttle offers much in the way of privacy.

However, the International Space Station, now being built by NASA with contributions from

Russia, Japan, and the European Space Agency, will be roomy enough. Crew members will have individual privacy spaces, zero-gee bedrooms. Mixed crews will be aboard the ISS for weeks and months at a time. There will even be married couples in some of the crews.

The inevitable will happen soon, even if it hasn't already.

Imagine making love in zero gravity. You and your lover are weightless, drifting languidly in midair as if in a dream, no longer pinned down to a mattress or a couch, free to use both arms and both legs. Everything floats buoyantly in zero-gee because there is no gravity to make things sag.

Well, not quite....

THE PHYSIOLOGICAL FACTS

Interesting things happen to the human body in zero-gee.

You grow taller by a couple of inches. Your waist and legs become

thinner. Your face takes on a higher-cheeked, slightly oriental cast. You tend to lose a few pounds of body liquids, at least for the first few days.

All this happens to your body because it is suddenly weightless, free of the constant force of gravity that has been trying to pull you down to the center of the Earth all your life.

You grow taller because your spine unbends. Earth's gravity working on your spine compresses the discs between your spinal vertebrae, squeezing the vertebrae closer to one another, forcing your body into an S-shaped curvature. In zero-gee, your weightless vertebrae are no longer being squeezed. The discs expand and you grow taller by two inches or so.

However, in zero-gee there is a difference between the head-to-toe length of your body and your "effective body height." In weightlessness, your body tends to take on a simian-like crouch when relaxed, with the back slightly bent and the

arms floating up to chest height. It is rather like floating in warm, buoyant water. Space medics call this the "neutral body posture." You can stand straighter if you want to, but it takes some exertion to do so.

The fluids inside your body feel the effects of zero gravity, too. Instead of being pulled down they suddenly are weightless. Astronauts have measured three-inch decreases in their waist sizes, because their internal fluids tend to shift upward, into the chest.

Your legs will also slim down in zero-gee, in part because the blood and other fluids that tend to pool in your lower extremities on Earth now migrate to other parts of the body. Increased height, wasp waist, fuller chest, slimmer legs...it all sounds pretty good. But there's a down side to your body's reaction to being in orbit.

Without having to fight against the constant stress of gravity, the body's muscles tend to lose strength and mass. The medics call this "deconditioning," which is slightly

MICROGRAVITY VS. ZERO-GEE

Technical note: While almost everybody refers to weightlessness as "zero gravity," the purists call it "microgravity" because the mass of the spacecraft itself exerts an infinitesimal gravitational pull of its own. This becomes important for very delicate scientific measurements, but it has no discernable affect on the human body. To everyone except the purists, it's "zero-gee."

misleading. Your body is adapting to the conditions in which it finds itself. It is only "deconditioned" when you have to return to Earth and suddenly find yourself facing a full terrestrial gravity again.

Still, the progressive loss of muscle tissue and strength is a problem that must be dealt with. The heart is a muscle, remember, and when it is pumping blood that is weightless, it becomes just as deconditioned as any other muscle of your body.

Moreover, your bones slow their production of calcium after several months in weightlessness. Again, the body is merely adapting to the conditions of zero-gee. But calcium-poor bones can become brittle and too weak to support your weight when you return to Earth.

The answer to the problems of deconditioning lies in exercise. Stressing the heart and other muscles, as well as the bones, is a necessity for anyone who spends more than a few days in orbit.

Astronauts and cosmonauts have used gym equipment and stationary bikes to exercise their muscles, including their hearts. Perhaps one day sexual activities will be a prescribed (and preferred) part of an astronaut's exercise routine.

SPACE SICKNESS

There is also the problem of space sickness. Most people get nauseated when they first go into orbit.

NASA calls it "space adaptation syndrome," or SAS, and for once the technical jargon tells it like it is.

Space sickness is not like sea sickness or any other kind of motion sickness. It is truly a problem of your body's adaptation to the weightless conditions of orbit as your bodily fluids shift around inside you.

Astronaut William R. Pogue, who spent eighty-four days in orbit aboard the Skylab space station in 1973-74, describes his feeling in his delightful book, *How Do You Go to the Bathroom in Space?* this way:

"The first thing you notice when you go into space is an absence of pressure on your body. You may feel lightheaded or giddy. After a half hour or so, your face may feel flushed and you might feel a throbbing in your neck. As you move about, you will notice a strong sensation of spinning or tumbling every time you turn or nod your head. This makes some people uncomfortable or nauseated. You will also have a very 'full feeling' or

stuffiness in your head. You may get a bad headache after a few hours, and this too may make you feel sick to your stomach."

Most astronauts adjust to weightlessness within a day of entering orbit. Experience seems to help, and NASA medical researchers have developed medicines and training routines that alleviate SAS. Psychologists have determined that it helps to have the spacecraft interiors designed with a visually obvious "ceiling" and "floor." In zero-g, "up" and "down" lose their physical meaning. Everything that is not fastened down tends to float.

There is no need for chairs in zero-g. Nor for beds. Sleeping accommodations aboard the ISS will consist of cocoon-like zippered mesh bags fastened to a privacy compartment's wall. Once zippered up, the mesh will keep its occupant from floating loose while asleep.

Even the best-trained, most experienced astronauts need at least a few hours to get accustomed to zero-g. Once you do become adjusted to weightlessness, however, you will probably experience an almost euphoric feeling. You can float through the air inside your space vehicle, doing weightless acrobatics almost effortlessly. In orbit, astronauts can lift masses that would

be impossibly heavy on Earth. During a Skylab mission, astronaut Alan Bean demonstrated the effect of zero-g by doing pushups with teammates Jack Lousma and Owen Garriott on his back. However, although everything is essentially weightless in orbit, objects still have mass and therefore inertia. A massive object in motion can still injure the unaware person who thinks it can be stopped with a fingertip.

NEWTON AND LOVEMAKING

In weightlessness, Isaac Newton's laws of inertia become strikingly obvious: a body in motion will remain in straight-line motion unless and until some outside force deflects or stops it. You can launch yourself across the interior of a space station's living module and sail smack into the opposite wall, if you are not careful.

This has fascinating implications for foreplay. Imagine two human bodies floating in zero-g. The slightest touch on your partner will send him or her bobbing away from you, in three dimensions: up and down, as well as north, south, east and west. You are going to need a compartment with padded walls, or you will have to confine your

FALLING (LITERALLY!) IN LOVE

When you are in orbit it feels as if you are constantly falling. That's because you are.

Gravity doesn't disappear when you are in orbit. The Earth is still pulling on the spacecraft, still trying to tug it back down to the ground. But once the spacecraft is traveling at a velocity of five miles per second (18,000 miles per hour) its forward speed cancels gravity's pull. In effect, the spacecraft is falling, but it is moving so fast that its fall never reaches the ground.

Think of yourself at bat in a baseball game. You hit the ball, it flies up and off some distance, then gravity pulls it back to the ground. Next, Mark McGwire comes up to bat. He smashes a shot that soars completely out of the ballpark. But eventually gravity brings the ball back to Earth. Now imagine Superman at the plate. He hits the ball so hard it rockets up, up and away at a velocity of five miles per second. Gravity keeps trying to pull it back to Earth but the ball is moving so fast that it "falls" in a curve that completely misses the Earth! Its path circles all the way around our planet.

The ball is in orbit.

And it will stay in orbit as long as it maintains that velocity of 18,000 miles per hour.

Notice that the ball is actually falling, even though its fall never reaches the ground. That is why the weightlessness of orbit is often called "free fall." That is why astronauts and cosmonauts often feel nauseated when they first go into orbit.

And you probably will, too.

lovemaking to an intimately small cubicle, where there is no room to roam.

Since the heart can pump blood more effectively in zero-gee, erections will most likely be easier to accomplish and maintain.

But now comes the crucial moment. How can coitus be achieved when the slightest touch can send a body bouncing away from you?

NASA has already solved this

problem—for machines. When two spacecraft are "mated" in the weightlessness of orbit, they inevitably are fitted out with "male" and "female" appendages that fit together. In NASA parlance, the approach and connection of two spacecraft is called "rendezvous" and "docking." Some rendezvous and docking procedures are done by remote control, directed by technicians on the ground; others are

accomplished by astronauts or cosmonauts aboard the spacecraft.

If two orbiting spacecraft can be mated by remote control, a human couple with grasping hands and willing minds should be able to solve the problems of rendezvous and docking gladly. Solving this problem should, in fact, be quite enjoyable.

BABIES AND HONEYMOONS

Despite the problems presented by SAS and Newtonian inertia, human couples will meet and mate in zero-gee — if they have not done so already. The rendezvous and docking problems are trivial, compared to the power of the sex drive.

There seems to be no physiological reason why a woman could not get pregnant in zero-gee. Sperm cells are guided to the egg cell by chemical signals that the ovum emits; in the microscopic cellular world, pervaded by liquid, the human-scale concepts of "up" and "down" do not apply even on Earth.

How a fetus will develop in the space environment is another, and largely unknown, story. Weightlessness itself might not be a problem, although the increased radiation aboard a spacecraft might pose difficulties if the mother remains in space during the entire term of her pregnancy.

I have a vision of a time, not so far in the future, when we will see zero-gravity honeymoon hotels in orbital space. Even if the newlyweds suffer from SAS for a day or so, the remainder of their stay in weightlessness could be truly "out of this world" pleasure for them.

I even have an advertising slogan that an orbital honeymoon hotel could use: "If you like waterbeds, you're going to love zero-gee."

Dr. Ben Bova is the author of more than a hundred futuristic novels and nonfiction books. His latest novel is *Venus*, an adventure set on Earth's "sister planet." He is also the publisher of GalaxyOnline.com.



Carol Emshwiller's stories are unusual and hard to mistake for anyone else's. She is the author of the novels, Carmen Dog, Ledoyt, and Leaping Man Hill, along with such story collections as Verging on the Pertinent and The Start of the End of It All. Her story in our anniversary issue last year marked her return to our pages after an absence of more than thirty years and we can promise you there are more to come.

Foster Mother

By Carol Emshwiller

DIRECTIONS FOR THE SMALL:

YOU'LL HAVE TO BOTTLE feed it. Give it plenty of strokes and hugs until it'll follow no one but you. Don't let it get too obstreperous. That can happen when no other big ones of its own kind are around. Then hand it over and leave the rest to us.

You may name it if you feel so inclined though a name is not necessary. We'll give it a name of our own choosing if we need one.

Don't expect too much. They have small brains, about the size of two lima beans. As far as we know, their smiles might not be smiles. Their tears, not tears. Though they bleed, they don't feel pain as we do.

Afterward, let it go on with what it has to do. Go live a different story someplace far from here. Don't come back.

Remember it belongs to us.

And so I'm thinking: Lester? Jester? Or, on the other hand, Baladin? Balladeer? He should have a name the opposite of what he will become. It

might stand him in good stead, and there might be a little bit of hope.

Probably nobody will ever get to know the name except for the two of us.

He'll have to find his own kind of joy by himself. Best to have a joyful name. At least that. And best we laugh a lot (if that *is* laughing). Tickle and tussle. Dance.

They call him, "it." The sex is not important to them.

He was absolutely the cutest thing I ever saw. They start out small. Just like us. Little chubby goat-boy. Little chubby donkey-boy. Loves me already. As who else is there but me? I know I mustn't take it personally.

But now, later, little *skinny* boy and even more goat-like and still the cutest thing I ever saw. Now he calls me *Mush, Mushka, Mash....* I don't remember how that started. I call him *Kookie, Cookie....*

I think he should have a musical instrument. Something that makes a deep bass sound. Tuba or some such? Or the biggest viol there is? Except he's still too small. I think trumpet. That'll sound out nicely from mountain to mountain, though it is a bit on the military side and reminds me of those others who are in charge of us.

See us — both of us leaping, though I'm not as good at it as he is. See us on cliff edges, naked or almost. Well, he is, the sun browning us. See them, pointing up at us and looking pleased, folding their hands around their important papers, all the paraphernalia of their status and their jobs hanging about them. They wear so much nobody knows what they look like. Are they us or are they some sort of alien?

He depends on me. In the beginning I even chewed his food for him. Better than trying to cut it. They didn't give me a grinder.

We take long walks holding hands. When he gets tired I carry him piggyback. I made him booties. They don't supply footwear or clothes. They say he grows too fast for them to bother. They say he doesn't need shoes. (Actually, they don't supply much of anything.) We fish. We pick flowers. By now he knows the names of all the ones around here. They say he's not smart enough for that, but he *is*.

We brought home a gopher snake. We hope it stays and lives under our shack. We named it Squiggly. We planted an apple tree. Already he says, "See my tree." We named it Appy.

When he's happy he wiggles all over. They said that wasn't happiness. They said he can't feel much more than rage. I think that's what I'm here for, to make sure it's rage. What he says most of all is "Let's get going." They think I'm too old to "get going" with him. They think I'll hold him back and that will make him angry, but even when he's about to roar at night I'm awake before it happens. I hear his first whimper so I'm by his side before it can turn nasty. I sing to him, long song stories. "That's a Ballad," I say. "That's what I named you, Balladeer."

We live at the top of a strategic pass. He's supposed to get to know the whole region so he can patrol it. We climb to the mountain tops on each side, and across to the dangerous drop-off. He'll be able to leap off that one of these days, but now he's still too little to leap streams. We take off our booties and wade. (He goes through booties like you wouldn't believe.)

It's a paradise up here. If, that is, one likes one's paradise steep and rocky, with boulders to climb around or over. A paradise if one likes it rugged. If one likes to slip and slide, and suddenly, flop! so, now and then, be on the ground looking straight up into the, usually, blue sky.

He gets into everything. I brought out my suitcases and shoes and hats. They forgot he might have wanted toys, but — well — when did a young one ever need toys when there are pebbles and sticks and flat pieces of slate, pots and pans, packing boxes? And I have paper and crayons. Pieces of cloth. I know he's male (or he seems so to me) but I made him a rag doll.

What energy! I wonder what his real mother would have done with him? Of course she'd have been much stronger.

Frankly, I think he knows a lot more than even I can guess. I don't need to tell him not to show his smarts. I think he's hiding them even from me. On the other hand, we're supposed to show off his athletic prowess. He's still awkward. What can you expect from somebody growing so fast?

He has so much spark and sparkle. Sometimes I call him Bright Eyes. Brains like beans! I don't believe it.

But I worry. His future can't possibly be good. I think he will die a bad death well before his time. One never wants that for a creature one has raised from birth.

I wonder if we should run away. Pretend we got lost in the hills. But he's too little for that now.

Could I take him back to where he came from? There must be some sort of a mother somewhere. Unless he was made some odd scientific way.

I'm wondering more and more why I was picked for this job? I volunteered, but so did lots of others. There must be something special about me, but special in a good way or a bad way? Probably something inept. A stupid side. What is it I don't see? It's most likely the most important thing of all. By the time I find out, it'll probably be too late.

But I wonder if my looks had anything to do with it? Is that why we look alike? And what about my own teeth? They stick out, like his do. I always look as if I'm getting ready to bite somebody. Anyway, I don't care why they picked me. Look at us, how we get along. He'd sacrifice himself for me, and I'd do the same for him. I would have the minute he was put in my arms, squeaking and so tiny and vulnerable.

I had to promise to keep him a secret, and I had to sign that I was aware my own life was in danger, but, I wonder, from him or from them?

What does a weapon need to know? I don't suppose much. Certainly not the names of flowers. Probably how to obey simple commands. A few words of everyday life might come in handy. How to snarl.

Anyway, somebody has to care for creatures when they're juveniles, don't they? — no matter what they are to become.

They never told me what he'd end up being. I see hardly any signs. Perhaps that's where my stupidity lies. As far as I'm concerned he's exactly the baby I always wished I'd been able to have. I think we even look alike. I see myself in the way he smiles. The words he knows are my words. But I suppose, when I've given him over and he's all grown up, I won't recognize him at all.

So far he's only a little bit scaly, his toenails only a little bit too horny. You hardly notice. I wonder when his teeth will be growing? Now he's just

losing them. We put them under his pillow. (He does have a pillow. He carries it with him all the time. He'd take it outside if I let him.) And he gets a treat in the morning. Not money. What would we do with money way out here?

I see the eyeteeth peeking out. Maybe they'll all be eyeteeth pretty soon.

They said they question his ability ever to follow more directions than three in a row, but already he remembers more than I do. He counts to a hundred with no trouble. He loves to yell it out, but I tell him to whisper. I have a hard time holding him back. He has a loud, echoing voice and loves to use it. I suppose he won't need a trumpet, he already sounds like one.

Sometimes I tell him his name should be, "Let's Go." And he tells me mine should be, "Wait a Minute." But I think I've been too much: Wait a Minute. I think we should run away now. At first I thought we should wait until he's larger and stronger, but that might be a mistake. I think we should run away while he's still easy to handle.

"Come on, Let's Get Going," I say. "Get your pillow. We're going on a trip. You'll like it."

He likes it already and we haven't even started. He's running round and round the kitchen table, leaping up on it every now and then. He couldn't do that last year. He'll be leaping wider streams than I can. I hope he waits for me. I'll give him the heavy backpack to hold him down.

I don't say, "Save your energy." He has plenty for anything.

He's singing. Dumb things like, "Here we go loop-de-looping-loo."

I say, "Come kiss me before we get going. A big fat wet one. Give me a big fat hug."

I have a funny feeling. Worried. I'm not exactly a knowledgeable person — about anything, even the wilderness we're on the edge of right here. They probably picked me for that ignorance.

So we get going, him skipping and trumpeting as usual. Every now and then he shouts and jumps up and down out of sheer joy. He's as if on springs, backpack and all. I don't know how he does it.

Pretty soon I'm going to tell him we're on a secret trip and he should keep quiet.

We go up into the treeless places and over the cliffs. It's his turn to be helping me. He leaps me over streams. We have to hurry. We have to get down into the trees before they come to check on us.

As soon as we get well into them, I stop to give him a lesson (I need a rest anyway). I say that, if we get found out, he should leave me there to face them alone and go hide by himself. I say, "Those rolls of paper they hold on to all the time could be weapons." I explain weapons. I explain how he's tough, but not that tough. Besides, they're discovering new weapons all the time. No matter how strong and scaly he gets, they'll have found something to destroy him with. "Leap a lot," I say. "Side to side. And their weapons might be silent. They might look like pieces of paper. They have all those jewels. Those might be weapons, too."

I see in his eyes that he understands. (Are his eyes getting smaller or is he getting larger all around them?) How could they say his brain was the size of two beans? He sparkles with intelligence. And love. As I'm telling him all these things (that I'd not thought I'd have to do till later) he holds my hand with his sandpapery one. I raise it to my lips and then he does the same to mine, clunk against his teeth. "Balladeer," I say, "but don't sing now."

"Ho dee ho dee ho dee ho," he says, but softly. It's a joke.

We sleep that night curled around each other. We always sleep that way. He doesn't keep me warm. He never has. I've suspected for a long time that he's cold-blooded. He's so sluggish in the morning, but of course I was, too, at that age. I just couldn't wake up. My mother always had to come in and shake me. Yelling and knocking at my door just didn't do it. All that growing takes energy.

It happened just as I was afraid it would. We got caught. He was getting too big to hide even here in the trees.

Of course they picked morning, and an especially cold one. It'll take him a while to realize anything. It'll prove to them all the more his brains are beans.

We ran — started to. He pulled me along with him, but there was no

direction to go in. They were all over. Then he let go of me and did as I'd told him, jumped a great leap. Over all of them. I'd no idea he could do that and he wasn't even warmed up yet. He trumpeted. He was over the cliff, down and going.

One of them stayed to keep me prisoner but the rest went after him. I saw he was all right at the bottom of the cliff, leaping and leaping. Trumpeting and skipping. For him it was still as much fun as the first part of the trip. As if this was what he was born for and maybe he was. Or at least it's sort of what he was born for. Certainly for leaping about the forest knocking down trees, pulling up bushes and tossing them into the air. I'm wondering if I was born for this, the other side of it, to stand here handcuffed while he cavorts away, down the cliffs? I wish he'd carried me off with him, but I told him to go. I waved him away. "You're on your own." I kept yelling it and, "Love you," until I couldn't see him anymore.

He knocked down three of those keepers as he leaped away. One got stepped on. None got killed which is more than I can say about what they want to do to him, what with all these weapons. Or what might be weapons. He doesn't know the difference between them and the enemy— whoever that is. I wish I had thought to tell him about the downtrodden. I know whose side he'd be on if he knew about us, but there's no rage in him toward anybody and never has been. There's only joy.

"Dead!" they said, but they've never brought any pieces of him back. Not even a claw nor a greenish scale to prove it. You'd think they would have.

I knew, though, whether he was dead or not, they'd say he was. They won't want anybody but themselves out there looking for him, but I think he may be roaming yet. On a rampage. On a love rampage. Because he loves me.

I'll never know. I don't want to. Yes, I do. I'll go hallooing off myself. They won't bother stopping me. Maybe I won't find him, but, if he's out there, he'll find me.

They tore him from my arms. (Or, more like it, they tore me from his arms. He was bigger than me by then and stronger. My skin came off on his claws. Metaphorically speaking, that is.) Of course all this might be what was supposed to happen from the start: That he should love me and

that he should lose me and that they should say he's dead. I only just figured it out right now, which shows how slow I am.

But this is not the end. He's out there. And he has a right to be. Trumpeting. Rearing up. I know exactly what he's doing. It's what we always did. Peering at flowers and bugs and such. Watching snakes. Eating berries. Maybe finding a bee tree and getting honey. Sitting quietly until some animal or other comes to see what he is. And still sitting, letting the animal, whatever it be...[once we sat like that for a fox and three kits] letting it be, come close and then letting it walk away, safe.

If you come upon him don't be frightened. Of course by now he'll be much bigger, but just sit down calmly and sing something. He likes music. Smile.



COMING ATTRACTIONS

IT HAS BEEN more than a decade since *F&SF* brought you a single-author special issue. It's with delight that we announce their return next month with a special tribute to Lucius Shepard.

Mr. Shepard's lyrical, exotic, often hallucinatory stories have graced our pages many times since "Solitario's Eyes" first appeared here in 1983. Next month's feature is a prime example of Mr. Shepard's prowess, a vivid story of contemporary Russia set in a strange club called Eternity. "Eternity and Afterward" will stay with you.

To accompany the story we'll have an appreciation of Lucius Shepard by Katherine Dunn, a bibliography, and a film column from Mr. Shepard that asks what's the deal with the Devil. A lovely cover by Barclay Shaw completes the package.

In the months that follow, we can look forward to new stories by Ian Watson, Geoff Ryman, Jack Dann, Robert Sheckley, Richard Bowes, and many more works of curious and rare delight. Stay tuned, stay tuned, you won't be disappointed.

Those of you who have enjoyed Ms. Casil's stories will be pleased to know that Without Absolution, her first story collection, has recently been published. She's well on her way to a second volume of stories—we hope it will include this affecting sf story, which she dedicates to her friend Julie.

To Kiss the Star

By Amy Sterling Casil

MELODIE KICKED HER HEELS restlessly against her wheelchair footrests. At last he had come. The bare whiff of bitter smoke told her that John, her Friendly Visitor, had lit his usual pre-visit cigarette on the Mary-Le-Bow Center patio.

How Mel loved the smoke. It reminded her of the bonfire her younger brothers had set on a long-ago, lazy autumn afternoon while she watched from the caned rocker on Mum's porch. Before she had lost her sight.

The leaves, brown and yellow and orange, had fired up with a crackle as the boys laughed madly, the smoke billowing skyward, nearly the same color as the icy gray Midlands clouds.

John's cigarettes, like the burning leaves. He had told her the name of his brand. An elegant name, vaguely exciting. Mel wouldn't forget it, because it was like his name: John. Her voiceboard was ready. She hit the up arrow just as she heard his feet padding into the dayroom.

"John Player Special," the voiceboard said.

"Aw, Mel, you caught me at it again."

Mel laughed, honking like a lost gosling. Something was wet on her chin. Drool, she supposed. John's hand touched her chest, then something soft and antiseptic-smelling wiped her face. Her bib.

The damn nurses had bibbed her, and she'd told them no bib, please, because John was coming. Today was her Friendly Visit. Furious at the nurses' betrayal, she kicked at the floor with her feet, rolling her chair back a few inches. John followed.

"You'll get me to quit," John said. "Just keep at me."

"You're too handsome to die young," Mel pressed into the voiceboard.

"Did your Mum call?" John asked.

Mel shook her head. More drool on her chin. "Don't wipe me," she said through the droning voiceboard. No intonation, no fury, just the bland voice with vaguely elongated vowels and clipped consonants, because that was how it made words, from vowels and sounds put together, depending upon how she rolled the smooth plastic ball controller and which of the four arrows she pressed.

"You're twenty-three, you don't need your Mum's permission."

"Twenty-four," Mel corrected. "I know," she added, about the permission.

"This is the chance of a lifetime, Mel. I thought you would have done it by now."

Mel nodded. John was right. She should be getting her implants by now. It wasn't every spastic, blind twenty-four-year-old cripple who won the lottery to explore the stars. Her number, chosen for the chance to be a probe controller for the ISA, sent light-years away to Tau Ceti or Sirius or wherever they needed to send her.

"I thought today might be our last visit, so I brought you this. It's nothing much." John took her better hand, her left, and pressed something into it. Mel felt a delicate chain and small hard cubes that she rubbed between her fingers. A bracelet, with beads or stones, deliciously warm from being in John's pocket.

"For me?" Mel hadn't expected a gift. Especially not anything so personal, like a bracelet. Again, the wetness on her chin. Disgusting spit! Damn rebellious mouth! She heard herself making noises, but she couldn't reach for the voiceboard just then, because John was fastening the bracelet around her wrist.

"It's a W-W-J-D bracelet," he said. The cube-shaped beads had cooled because Mel hadn't any circulation in her hands. Cold hands, warm heart, her Mum had always said. The bracelet was loose. Mel was afraid that it would slip off as she jerked her arms around like a puppet, the way she did sometimes.

"Wuh, wuh, wuh," Mel said, with her mouth.

"What does it mean? Oh, sure — it means 'what would Jesus do?'"

"Thank you," Mel said through the voiceboard. Why had she thought it might be a real bracelet — that the beads might be pearls? Like boyfriends and girlfriends gave each other. She didn't believe at all in Jesus. How could she, after the way she'd turned out? No God she would ever believe in could let people turn out the way she had.

"I love it," she said, glad that the voiceboard was so easy to use for lies.

John steadied her wrist. Mel realized she'd been flailing again. "After you go, we probably won't see each other again. I mean, by the time you get back — " He paused.

"You'll be very old," Mel said.

"I'll probably be dead," John said, laughing.

Mel changed the subject. "How's your song doing?"

John didn't say anything for a moment. "Oh, crackers, you know. Fire it up."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Good," John said. "We're doing the next one right now."

"Viddy, too?"

"Viddy too. And the first thousand are special release. The kiddies get Star Bars with every copy and the first fifty get a T-Shirt."

"Très Fab," Mel said. "I wish I could see it." She'd heard John's music, but wanted so desperately to see the videos. John was a viddy star musician. Played guitar and sitar. Hana, the morning nurse, had told Mel that John was "a God...so totally fab."

"Look, Mel," John said. "Don't worry about your Mum. Or your brothers. Just go. If I had the chance, I'd take it in a heartbeat."

Mel shook her head. "I know. You're right," she said. They wouldn't wait forever. She wasn't the only one who could make the trip. There had to be lots of...cripples. Waiting for the chance. Sitting in their chairs and drooling, waiting for their number to come up, for ISA to pick them and

make them something like whole again. No. That wasn't it. Not whole, but something...different. Turn the whole stinking, spastic body off. Adapt the brain which was functioning, discard the body that wasn't, and shoot it off to the stars. Live forever and go where no man could ever go. Not a whole one, anyway. Small things like brains could go in hardened housings. Big things like bodies couldn't. Or shouldn't.

"Mel, why on earth are you waiting?" John asked.

Because of you, John, Mel thought.

"I know it doesn't hurt," John said. "I saw a vid all about it. It's like magic, how they put you in the probe."

Mel flailed until she found John's hand where it rested near her leg. His warm fingers stroked her cold palm. "I'm afraid," she told him, even though that wasn't true. She couldn't possibly say the truth.

"That's natural," he said.

Her head began to roll around, then her chin fell on the damp bib.

"I asked them if I would be able to see again," she continued. "They haven't answered me."

"I'm sure you'll be able," John said, squeezing her hand. "You'll have better senses than any normal person."

"I guess that's better than having the senses of an abnormal person," Mel said.

John laughed loudly. Mel sensed that his laughter was forced. "That's what I love about you," he said. "You've got a smashing sense of humor."

Didn't all cripples?

"Take me for a walk on the patio," Mel said, folding her hands in her lap. "You can smoke there. I don't mind." John was a very good Friendly Visitor. He put his hand on her shoulder and guided her gently as they went.

Mum brought sandwiches packed in a wicker basket. Mel smelled the sandwiches — pressed liver and spirulina paste, she thought — and also smelled the basket, hearing the crackle as Mum opened it. She'd taken Mel out across the wide field, where the pollen made Mel sneeze, stopping when they reached the small hillock in the middle. The sun burned the part on the top of Mel's head. She asked for a napkin. Sighing, Mum covered Mel's hair and laid out the food.

"Can you chew today, dear?" Mum asked.

Mel nodded. She seldom used the voiceboard with Mum. Mum preferred it that way; she liked Mel to use the baby talk and the grunting which had been all Mel could manage for most of her life.

"How are the boys?" Mel asked.

"Oh, fine. Jack's got a new girlfriend. Peter's still into his electric trains." Mum fed Mel a piece of the sandwich. She had been right: it was liver sausage and stale-tasting spirulina paste.

"How about Davey?"

"Oh, the same," Mum said. This meant that Davey hadn't quit using. Davey was two years younger than Mel. He was tall and athletic, but he'd started in with drugs at the age of twelve and had never held a job for longer than two weeks. Davey was Mum's favorite.

Mum sat by Mel's chair, spreading out her skirt with a rustle of fabric. "Listen," she said. "About your e-mail."

Mel deliberately pushed some chewed sandwich paste out of her mouth and made a choking noise. Mum got up, knees crackling, to wipe Mel's face.

"Dear, I don't think you should do this. It's horribly dangerous. And you'll never..."

"Never what?" Mel said through her voiceboard.

Mum roughly wiped the sandwich paste away, then stuffed another piece in Mel's mouth. "You know what I mean."

"You mean that will be it once they do the implants and get rid of my body."

"Yes. Don't be smart."

"What does it matter, Mum? What good is my body now?"

"Dear, we've been over it. Don't you think if they can send a ship to another star, they might not find a cure for you? What if you do this, and the next day they come up with an operation which would make you..."

"Normal?" Mel said. "They can give me a prosthesis body now, Mum. But where would the money come from?"

Mum was weeping. "Christ on His cross, Mel," she said. "Why do you always have to throw it in everyone's face?"

Mel said nothing. She thought of John, the way he smelled. She wanted to see his face, all fab, the way the nurse Hana described him. She

imagined herself normal, wearing a white seersucker dress, running across the field with John, laughing. John's hair was long — she had touched it. Hana had told Mel it was dark brown and shone in the light. Soft, and a little bit curly. Mel's hair was thin and patchy, a muddy dark blond. It had gotten worse since she'd gone blind. Before, she had been able to comb it on her best days; put ribbons and bows in it. Now, it was chopped off just below her ears so it wouldn't fall in her face or get nasty with bits of food or drool. Practical, the way things needed to be at the Mary-Le-Bow Center.

"I'm going to do it," Mel said through the voiceboard, glad of its impersonal drone.

"Mel!"

"Don't argue, Mum." Mel remembered what John had said, about her being old enough. She wished she could have said it with his style, his carefree flair.

Mum's arms were around her. Mel's face was pressed uncomfortably between Mum's breast and her bony shoulder. "I'll never see you again, luv. Not if they send you off on that ship."

Straining to move her arm, Mel got one hand on the voiceboard. "You never come unless there's something wrong anyway," she said, knowing what it would do to Mum.

"Oh, Mel," Mum sobbed. "How can you hurt me so?"

"John says I should go for it," Mel said. The voiceboard droned on. "I think I will," she said, although she did not mean it. Going would mean leaving John.

THE ISA COUNSELING specialist was an American. Mel supposed that she should have expected that. The Americans had pioneered the technology for the space probes. No normal bodies could survive the trip to other stars, with the hard radiation and all the other myriad challenges. So, the essential part of people — their brains — had been placed in hardened housings and intimately connected to the probe itself. It was one way to do it. Not the only way — just a way — to explore and discover ahead of the complex and costly generation ships which would follow.

Because of the danger involved, condemned criminals were to have

been the initial probe controllers. But that hadn't gone over. Why not give people a chance who deserved it? That was the public outcry, about the time Mel had gone blind. The ISA had decided that people like Mel should be selected, not criminals.

If you were a registered applicant and your number came up in the lottery, you had thirty days to decide. If you declined, your chance went to someone else: another waiting cripple. You couldn't be older than twenty-five. You couldn't be married, and couldn't have any children. If you were under legal age, your guardian had to give permission. Mel knew all this, but it was repeated for her during her orientation. She didn't know why she was surprised when the ISA people came to the Mary-Le-Bow Center. She supposed it was easier to bring the equipment and the specialists to the cripple, rather than transferring her.

The ISA counseling specialist, who had a western twang which Mel thought was very cowboy-like, told her how the implants worked.

"We put them into your cerebral cortex," he said. "Bio-electrical devices. We also implant controls into the main nerve centers which control body function — cerebellum and pons and so on. The probe will become your body."

"I've never had very good control," Mel said.

He chuckled. "This will be different," he said. "After we start the process, you'll have two weeks to decide if you want out. In fact, you can stop it at any point up until the time we — "

"Get rid of my body," Mel said.

"Yeah," the counselor said. "You got it."

"Can you tell me something?" Mel asked.

"Anything. I'm here to answer all of your questions."

"Before you put me in the..."

"Housing," he said.

"I want to know if I'll be able to see again. Is that part before or after?"

"Oh," he said, drawing in his breath, as if she'd surprised him. "You could see some things, I think. You'll have your visual cortex connected and I suppose we could fix something up. I hadn't thought about it quite that way before. Not everyone we work with is blind."

"Before the final step — will I be able to move?"

The counselor clicked his tongue. "Move? Well, you mean more than

you can right now? I'm afraid not. We'll have to shut many functions down. You may not be able to move at all."

"My voiceboard?"

There was a pause. "Possibly. I can't tell until we evaluate you further. With your degree of motor impairment, it's difficult to know. There may be seizures. We are working with your brain, you know."

"If I can't use my voiceboard, how will I tell you to stop?"

The counselor touched her hand. He tapped the middle of her palm with one finger.

"Twice a day until the final step, I'll tap your hand once. You move your fingers, if you want to go ahead. If I don't feel anything, I'll tap twice. Like this." She felt him tap two times. "If you move then, we'll stop. Remove the implants."

"That's good," she said. "Is that it for today?"

The counselor patted her shoulder, impersonally. "If you're tired," he said.

"No," Mel said. "I'm not tired. But today is my Friendly Visitor day. I'm expecting someone."

"Oh," the counselor said. "Well, that's good. Who is she?"

"Him," Mel said. "His name is John. He's a musician."

"Very good," said the counselor. Then, he left.

Mel waited in the dayroom for an hour. No one came. Finally, she wheeled to the door and pressed the call button. She guessed it had been about ten minutes when a nurse finally showed up. It was Hana.

"Yes, luv?"

"Hana, I was waiting for John."

"Oh, he's not here?"

Mel had to force her exhausted, trembling hands over the voiceboard. "Do you see him?"

"No, luv. I suppose he's not coming today. Let's give you a nice bath. You'll want to be all fresh for those nice ISA gentlemen. How lucky you are!"

"I suppose so," Mel said, hoping that John would come later. It was so unlike him not to come, and not to call. He always called, and he was hardly ever late. After the bath, during which Hana had scrubbed too hard, Mel thought, though she couldn't say anything without the voiceboard,

Mel sat by the window in her room, feeling the warm light on her cheeks. Why hadn't John come? Or called? No one knew anything, and it was too tiring to keep asking. She fell asleep in her chair. When she woke, it cold. She was still by the window, and they were fastening a dinner tray on her chair and tying a bib around her neck.

"Hana," Mel said to the nurse, who was washing something, Mel thought perhaps her water jug, in the sink.

"Yes?" Hana began to hum a little tune, something Indian-sounding. Maybe that was what John's music sounded like. Mel had always wanted to hear it, but John always forgot to bring his recordings. He was so busy.

"Before I go any farther with this, I want to do something." Mel paused, waiting for Hana's reaction. There was none. "I want to smoke a cigarette. Like John's," she continued.

"Oh, luv! The way you breathe? You'll keel over! It's nasty, nasty. Why would you want to do that?"

Mel kept working at the voiceboard. "I want to smoke a John Player Special. I want to eat lobster. I want to feel what it's like to have somebody..." Mel meant John, but she wasn't about to say so. "I want somebody's arms around me. I want to feel a kiss."

Hana turned off the water. Mel felt her sit on the bed, smelled her cologne. Hana's hand, damp from the water, brushed Mel's forehead.

"I think I understand." Hana's warm lips touched Mel's cheek. She took Mel's hand, and rubbed Mel's wrist in a soothing way.

Mel tried to speak with her mouth. "I wuh-wuh-hunt s-s-s-s..."

"You want a bit of life," Hana said. She raised Mel and held her close. "I'm no man, not like what you mean, but I love you, Mel-o-die." Hana almost sang Mel's name. Tears stung in the corners of Mel's eyes.

"I see what I can do about that lobster," Hana said. "My boyfriend's a chef. Have I ever said? He'd be proud to make something up for you. I don't eat meat, but I've heard that lobster is very good. You'll like it. But first, we'll get you dressed, for those ISA doctors."

Later that day, the ISA technicians finished implanting her visual bio-electrodes. The counselor told her that they'd made something up for her: a special visor similar to one which had been developed for cold-fusion technicians, the ones who worked with the magnetic bottles which

contained the reaction. A visor sensitive in the ultra-violet and infra-red, as well as the normal visual spectrum. Whatever she would see through it wouldn't be like what she had seen before she'd gone blind.

Mel's old doctor had said, brutally, Mel remembered, that she'd really gotten the short end of the genetic stick. Cerebral palsy—a spastic—with a heart defect, and retinitis pigmentosa. It didn't get much worse than that, he'd said.

The ISA counselor arrived, just as the technicians were fitting the visor. He spoke to her, holding her hand while they fitted the metallic piece over her temples and eyes. "I know it hurts. Just stay with us. It's going straight into your optic nerve, which ain't damaged. You oughta see something, but we can't guarantee technicolor."

Mel had shut her eyes. They'd said it didn't matter whether they were open or shut. It was going over the eyes, not into them. The implant went through her temples. The connection was so fine, he'd said, that no one could see it, and she wasn't supposed to feel it. Even so, Mel felt like they were breaking holes in her skull with a jackhammer.

"You can't move," the counselor explained. "It won't work until you've adjusted thoroughly and the implants have integrated."

Mel realized that they were drilling holes in her skull, not for the implant, but to stabilize the visor. She couldn't say anything. They'd taken her voiceboard away, promising to give it back when they'd finished. She heard a voice, moaning. Hers. Something dribbled on her chin. They whacked the crown of her head, again and again.

The counselor squeezed her hand. His finger tapped, once. She squeezed back. "That's great," he said. "Now, they'll activate it."

Mel closed her eyes. It was as if she had opened them, but she hadn't. A long, mournful-looking face appeared, grainy and hazy, like an antique telly when it was turned on. Big nose, and a wild head of bushy hair. The face smiled, crookedly, showing a mouth full of even, pale teeth. He must be the counselor, Mel thought. Her head was throbbing viciously, but she managed to smile in return. Somebody thrust the voiceboard in her lap.

"I see you," she said. "You've got a big nose."

"That's right, darlin'." The head turned. More shapes—the technicians' faces, appeared. Hazy and wavering, but unmistakably concerned. "Hey, she's got me!" the counselor called to them.

"I haven't seen anyone in six years," Mel said.

"And my good-looking mug is the first! I'm touched," the counselor replied. The technicians were grinning. They were both young, close to Mel's age. One blond-seeming, though colors just didn't look the way she remembered, and the other darker, with a thin, nervous face. Another face appeared. Dark, pretty, soft and round, with large eyes and full lips.

"Hana," Mel said.

"Ah, that's right! You can see!" Hana wheeled a cart toward Mel. The technicians grinned, parting to allow Hana to approach, while the counselor stepped back, crossing his arms. Hana lifted the cover of a metal dish with a flourish.

Mel remembered what lobsters looked like. This lobster was huge, his eyes black dots on long stalks. Mel almost expected him to lift his claws and start snapping at her. He was bright red, she thought, but somehow the color didn't look right. Too vivid, perhaps, as if he was glowing. He glowed with heat, she realized. She saw it, rising in waves from his shell.

Hana removed a claw and cracked it. She worked a piece of hot white flesh from the claw, dipped it in a small dish, and brought it to Mel's lips.

"Here's your taste of lobster," she said.

Mel took the soft flesh in her mouth and began to chew. It was silken and buttery, yielding to her tongue and her teeth. Beyond delicious. She closed her eyes, but the visor still worked — she could still see. They were smiling at her, Hana looking proud, the technicians nodding. The counselor took a handkerchief from his pocket, and blew his nose, trumpeting loudly.

Mel swallowed the lobster. "I can't close my eyes," she said.

"Yes, you can," the blond technician said. "Tap your temple, on the left side."

Mel flailed around a bit, then managed to slap the side of her head with her thumb. Everything went dark.

Her heart leapt with sudden fear. Had she broken it? "Now I can't see."

"Do it again. Right side." This time, Mel struggled with her bad right arm, and struck a glancing blow against her cheek. Nothing happened. She gritted her teeth, and tried again. This time, she hit her temple. Everyone reappeared, including the lobster.

"It works," Mel told them.

The blond technician slapped his darker partner on the back. "I told you!"

"So," the counselor said, leaning forward, causing his face to expand like a strange balloon. "What would you like to do? We have a day or two before we go further. How about a play? Something at the Globe? Or a museum? Would you like to see some paintings? Sculptures?"

Mel shook her head. "No, I'm okay. Maybe a book. I would like to read, like I used to." Before the RP had gotten so bad, Mel had devoured every book she could get her hands on. Listening to books wasn't the same. It was nice, but not as satisfying. She thought of John. Sometimes he had read to her. Shakespeare; the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. One time, from *Alice in Wonderland*. She wanted to see John, but she was reluctant to say so, especially with the technicians there.

The counselor shook his head. "I didn't think you'd be so easy to please," he said.

"I already told Hana what I wanted," Mel said.

Hana stroked Mel's forehead. "Yes, and you've gotten your lobster. Go ahead, finish it all. He's five pounds."

The blond technician whistled under his breath. "A fortune," the other one said.

Hana began to feed Mel. Mel gorged, smiling with pleasure. She rested her hand on her stomach as the others began to eat the rest of the lobster, grinning and laughing. She couldn't possibly finish all of it. She was warmly happy, the ache in her head fading, as the others ate.

Mel felt sleepy, and she told Hana that she wanted to take a nap. She thanked the technicians, and the counselor, who shook her hand with a crushing grip, again reminding her of a cowboy. He needed a cowboy hat to complete the picture, but otherwise, she thought that he was perfect. She reminded herself to ask him the next day whether or not he was from Oklahoma, or Arizona, or one of those other cowboy places in the States.

Hana pushed Mel from the dayroom into the long corridor, which was not as long as Mel had thought, now that she could see it. It was lined with dull prints of horses and huntsmen. She wheeled Mel into her room. How small the room was. The bed was narrow, with four plump blue pillows at the head, topped with Mel's teddy bear. There were a few pictures

tacked on a cork board to the right of the bed. The boys, Mel realized — how tall they had grown. A sink, where Hana and the other nurses washed things. A narrow window looked out on the roadway, where she saw rows of blockhouses across the street. Mel had often heard children playing in the morning. Now she knew where they lived.

She saw a daisy in a small vase on a table by the window. Spit tray beside it. A small closet was open on the opposite side of the room. Mel saw a row of open gowns hanging inside the closet, all the same, striped blue and white. Fuzzy slippers rested below the hanging hems of the gowns, which Mel realized for the first time had teddy bear heads on them. Mum had brought them for her birthday — Mel had instinctively disliked them and thought that the odd shapes she had felt on their toes represented defective workmanship, since Mum was always looking for a bargain. Mel looked down at her feet for the first time since she'd been able to see. She wore pale pink socks. Her feet were turned toward each other, and curled into themselves, like pictures she'd seen of Chinese women with their feet bound. They'd turned that way since she'd been blind. Above the doubled-over pink socks, her legs were the width of a broom handle, and dead, waxy white.

There was a mirror above the sink. A polished mirror, not glass, but steel.

Mel flailed about with her left arm. She couldn't reach her head.

"You take your nap now," Hana said. She left Mel in the middle of the room and went to the bed, getting the covers ready.

Mel stared at the mirror. If she moved a foot or two closer, she would be able to look into it.

"I'm sleepy," she said.

Hana took the voiceboard from her lap and put it on the table by the vase with the daisy. Hana turned back, and something in her expression told Mel that she had sensed what Mel was thinking.

"There's time for that later," Hana said.

Mel pushed the button on her chair which moved it forward, toward the mirror. Even though she didn't want to look, somehow she had to look. She gazed down at her stick legs a moment, then up to see her face in the mirror. Every bit of joy she had felt earlier, to see, and to taste, bled out of her. The visor was the least of it, like a big pair of blind metal sunglasses

over her face. Bolted over the strange, barely-human landscape which had been her face.

"Ih-ih-hut-ssss-zzz," Mel said through her slack lips. She saw the wetness on her pocked chin before she felt it. Hana retrieved the voiceboard and put it gently on Mel's lap.

"It's Friendly Visitor day tomorrow," Mel said. "If John comes, tell him I have been taken for more implants," she told Hana. "Tell him I'm not coming back."

"Oh, luv," Hana said.

"Leave me," Mel replied. Then, after a few seconds, she added, "please." She looked at her wrist and noticed the bracelet. How could John have visited her? Spoken to her? Touched her? On the bracelet were four tiny square beads set among smaller seed beads, like colored pearls. W-W-J-D, she read on the squares.

Goodbye, John. Her lips trembled. She heard herself making noises. Goodbye. She flailed around until she struck her left temple with a strong whack, and everything went black. Tomorrow, she would tell the ISA man to take off the visor, and to stop everything. Part of her wanted to go into the ship, if only to get rid of her horrible face. Another part of her said that the stars would hate her. Recoil from her, and she would wander, cold and alone forever. Somehow, that seemed appealing, but no. She would stay in her place in her wheelchair. That was all she deserved. All that was needed.

She would tell Hana...no. She would call herself. In the morning. She could see to go to the phone now. She would make sure that John knew he was no longer needed.

What would Jesus do? Jesus would weep.

"I won't go," Mel told Hana, when she came to take her to the dayroom. "I'm staying in bed." Mel knew that it was coming out as garbled moans — spastic talk — but Hana seemed to understand.

"I give up," Hana said, after struggling to get Mel to sit up in bed. Mel should have called, tried to stop John. She had just been so tired. She buried herself in the covers, kicking as well as she could until it felt as though she was covered completely. Like a cave. She got part of the sheet hooked around her hand and dragged it over her head, then turned on her side, away from Hana.

"Today's your visitor day," Hana said, trying to wheedle a response from Mel. "And those ISA men will be coming soon, too."

Mel pressed her lips together, forcing herself to think about Mum, and her brothers. She tried to go back to sleep, but fell only into a drowsy half-sleep, vaguely aware of Hana moving about, cleaning things, pottering in Mel's closet.

Mel shivered, as someone touched her arm. "You're still wearing my bracelet." It was John.

She jerked her arm, trying to pull it back under the warm, safe covers.

"I'm sorry to have missed our day." John patted her shoulder through the sheets.

Mel heard herself mumbling. She wasn't quite sure of what she wanted to say. No matter what, he wouldn't understand. God, let him not see her face.

"Mel, please sit up. I've got something to tell you." The bed sank down. He was sitting beside her.

She ground her face into the pillow. "Nuh-no," she said. She tried to call for Hana, then realized that she hadn't heard her soft movements, or her humming, for some time. The traitor had let John in, then left them alone.

John was pulling on the covers. Mel struggled, using her hands as weights, but it was hopeless. The sheets slipped away. She flailed toward her head, trying to cover what she could of her face. Her rebellious hand struck the right side of her head. She could see once more.

"Look, if it's this thing they've put on for your eyes, I don't care. It looks like sunglasses, is all. Big sunglasses."

"No!" Mel said. Desperation made her voice strong.

John grasped her shoulders. He turned her around as if she was a doll.

"Mel, I don't care. I've been visiting you for a year."

Her face. He was seeing her horrid face, and she couldn't cover it. She caught a glimpse of him through her clenched fists. She tried to strike her left temple, turn off the visor, but her arm was completely rebellious. He had her hands, both of them. He drew them away from her face.

A groan escaped her lips as she struggled. John, so fab. His features were fine, almost feminine. His hair was as soft and shiny as the hair of a dark, lovely woman. He had a small beard and mustache, neatly trimmed around his chin and lips. She held herself as still as she could, though every

muscle in her body was going wild. Her feet twitched beneath the covers, out of control.

John took her wrist, turning the bracelet. "That visor is nothing," he said, smiling. "I'm glad you're wearing the bracelet." Something shone on John's left hand. A ring—he'd never said he was married. Of course he was married. His wife was probably as stunning as he was.

"Muh-muh-muh," Mel said. She jerked her body toward the table and the voiceboard. John looked uncertain. She moved her shoulders toward the table, and his eyes followed.

"Your voiceboard. Right," he said. He retrieved it. While he walked across the room, Mel thought of covering herself again, but it was too late. He'd already seen her. And he'd been seeing her, for the past year. She had been a fool—a complete fool. She didn't know why he had come to visit her, but it certainly couldn't have been for any of the reasons she'd imagined for so long, in her self-deluded blindness.

When he put the voiceboard in her lap, she said, "It's so kind of you to visit the ugly cripple."

John looked puzzled, as he sat by her once more, then sympathy came over his face. No, Mel thought. Pity. She thought of hitting the visor again, going blind, but he was fab, as Hana said. The most gorgeous man she'd ever seen, she thought—and she had loved to collect pictures of the teen idols, before her eyes had gone. That had been stupid then, just the way this was stupid now. But she loved to look at his face, even as he looked on her with pity, as if she was some trapped laboratory monkey, or a freak from the vids.

"Come on," he said, forcing a cheery tone in his voice, Mel thought, "let's take a spin on the patio. I'll get you into your seat." Then, he retrieved her wheelchair from the corner (it was very worn and cracked on the seat, Mel noticed, shabby-looking), and brought it to the side of the bed. Mel allowed him to lift her into it. Shamed that she enjoyed his touch, Mel looked away from him, toward the window, and the vase with the daisy. The daisy drooped—that was the end for it. Mel wondered how long it had been there, and who had put it there. Probably Hana.

John guided her down the hall, though she no longer needed his help. Mel saw some of the other inmates of the Center peeking out of their doors. They looked jealously at them. Quite a few were elderly. More than

Mel had thought. She hadn't known how many there were during her blindness. She hadn't realized, although she could smell them, of course, always smell their terrible smell — death and decay and disinfectant.

When they reached the patio, John parked her in a sunny spot. A small bird, a linnet, Mel thought, flew past them, wings whirring. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, and a lighter.

"Come on," he said, shaking two cigarettes out. "Hana told me that you wanted to do this." He lit the cigarettes. Their tips glowed — her visor showed a round ball of whitish heat around the tips. John put the filter of one cigarette to her lips.

The filter was hot. The smoke burned her nostrils. She put her lips around the filter and drew in a breath. Choking, horrible. Her arms flailed. Couldn't use the voiceboard...couldn't speak...coughing, spitting.

John threw both cigarettes down, crushing them beneath his foot, then whacked Mel's back. "Oh, no," he said in an agonized voice. "I should have known!"

The visor blurred. Mel's eyes were watering, and she was gasping for breath between coughs. What a horrible, vile taste, like swallowing burning coals! Her throat began to swell.

At last, she began to breathe more easily, and the coughing slowed to little hacks wracking her chest every few seconds.

"That's the worst thing I've ever tasted," she told him.

John knelt beside her, patting her knee. He nodded, his eyes full of regret. "Oh, God, I was so stupid," he said.

"No," Mel said. "I asked for it. But I like lobster better."

"Hana told me what else you asked for," he said. Before Mel could react, he'd leaned forward and had his arms around her. His lips brushed her neck. His voice, so warm and soft, whispering, right next to her ear. Mel felt her body trembling, legs jerking around. Stop it, she told herself, but it was hopeless. Her chest grew hot; she felt the flush all the way up her neck, working its way over her cheeks. "Sweet Mel," he said.

She managed to get her hands on the voiceboard, even with John's body pressed against her lap.

"No," she said. "Please, John." How warm he was, how hard the muscles felt in his arms and shoulders. He smelled of John Player Specials and of some spicy cologne, and of his own clean, soft flesh.

He kissed her neck, gently. She glimpsed his face, eyes closed, moving in front of her, and though she closed her eyes beneath the visor, she still saw the patio, the canvas awning, the little bird flying over the cheap plastic furniture, as his firm, sweet lips touched hers. Not her mouth! She had seen the terrible teeth in the mirror; the misshapen lips, cracked and rough. What could she expect when she couldn't even stop herself from drooling, had to depend on others even to clean her teeth? It must be horrible for him to come so near. How could he?

"Why?" she asked.

His lips pressed tighter against hers, and his arms drew her close to his body, almost all the way out of the chair. Mel was afraid that she would explode with everything that was rushing through her; things she didn't even have words for. The patio wavered, her sight flickered, and she heard her heels rattling in the chair.

At last, he drew gently away, putting her back in the seat, and sat back on his heels. He was smiling, almost shyly.

"Hana said you wanted a kiss," he said. His voice was throaty and rough — a street-tough tone she'd never heard from him before.

Her hands fluttered over the voiceboard. At last, she made it say, "I was just saying that. I didn't really — "

"Yes you did," he said, putting his hand on her knee and looking into the visor, where her eyes should have been. As if he knew what she was thinking, he said, "The bloody thing covers your eyes. You have beautiful eyes, Mel."

She felt like he had stabbed her through her heart.

"Don't lie to me," she said.

His gaze was steady. "I've never lied to you," he replied.

She looked at his hand on her knee, where the ring glinted. "Yes, you have," she said, even though this wasn't exactly true, as she'd never asked him if he was married. She had always assumed that he wasn't.

He seemed confused at first, then he realized that she was looking at his ring. "Oh," he said. "That's what I had to tell you. Why I wasn't here last week. I got married."

"Last week?"

He laughed. "Yes. I should have told you. But it was really a last-minute thing."

Mel backed the chair across the patio. "Good luck to both of you," she

said. "I'm sure she's very beautiful." She was thankful this time that the voiceboard droned mechanically. It could almost sound sincere. She didn't want John to know that she was foolish enough to care.

He stopped the chair with one hand, just as she was about to go through the open glass door into the Center. "She is beautiful," John said. "She's going to have my baby."

A cry came from somewhere deep inside of Mel. She masked it with a cough. Let him think she was still choked up from the cigarette. She would endure whatever she had to endure before he left, and then she would go back into her room. She would take away the voiceboard, and turn off the visor. When the cowboy counselor came and tapped her hand, she would not move. She would not jerk, so that he couldn't possibly imagine that she wanted to go on with it. She would wait until he tapped twice, then clench her hand tightly, with all her strength. She would let them think that the visual implants had damaged her. Somehow, she would get them to take the damn thing off. Tear it off herself, if she had to. She could make her hands obey, if she tried hard enough. Then, she would be blind again. She wouldn't eat. Eventually, they would hook her up to machines, which would feed her. What was left of her body would waste away; then, real darkness.

John was talking, in the hard, street-wise tone she'd heard earlier from him. Mel refused to look at him.

"Alexandra and I have been together for a while. When she told me about the baby, it seemed like the right thing to do. My Da took off when I was just a kid. I'm not like that," he said.

"Good," Mel said, when he said nothing for a while.

John took her hand. Mel stared at the blank patio wall. Ugly gray bricks. She began to count them.

"Look, I'll never forget you," he said. "You've kept me going."

"Right," she said.

He squeezed her hand, then stroked her wrist and toyed with the bracelet.

"Take it away," she said. "I don't want it."

A wet drop hit her hand. John's voice, when he spoke again, sounded strange and thick. As if he was crying. It couldn't have been a tear, she told herself. Men didn't cry.

"No," he said. "It was for you. I thought you might be able to put it in the probe. To protect you when you go off."

"Take it," she repeated. "Damn you. I'm not going anywhere."

He tugged on the bracelet, but didn't remove it. "Oh, Mel," he said. "You've got to go!"

"Never," she said. "Go away. Take your cheap bracelet and go back to your wife." There — she had said it. Now, he'd leave.

He said nothing for a long while, then she felt his hand, lightly stroking her hair. No — she would not turn. She'd never look at him again.

"I did lie to you," he said, in a low voice. "That bracelet cost me a day's pay."

"Bully for you," she said. What a liar he was. It was just cheap beads, probably plastic.

"I had my eye on it for weeks. I had the fellow put it aside and I went after work to pick it up, the day I gave it to you."

Work? What was he talking about?

"I lied to you about what I do," John said. "I'm no viddy star. I work mornings at the Virgin store and afternoons I work at my step-dad's shop. Those were someone else's tunes you heard. Stuff I listen to for myself. Real musicians."

Mel drew in a sharp breath. Not a viddy star?

"My step-dad repairs guitars and sitars and such. That's how I know about them. Yeah, I play a little," he said.

Mel's fingers went to the voiceboard. "You should have said," she said. "You didn't have to pretend. I — " she paused, moving her fingers tentatively back and forth. "I liked you for you."

Another tear fell on the back of her hand. "I wanted to impress you. When I first came, the nurses made a big show of saying I looked like a viddy star. It pumped me up a bit. When you believed them, I thought, why not play along? It went from there."

"You never told me why," Mel said.

"Why what?" She turned toward him, to see his handsome face once more. His eyes were swollen — yes, he had been crying.

"Why you came to visit. Someone like me."

"Oh, that," he said, shaking his head. He drew the back of his hand across his eyes. "Uh, well, I'm a Christian. It was part of my service to the

church. Every two weeks. We all do something and this was my thing."

"Oh," she said, turning away. Of course. It would be something like that.

John seemed to realize her disappointment. He reached toward her, then drew back, as if he knew that touching her was the wrong thing at this moment. His face grew serious. "It became more than that," he said. "So much more. I mean, you're so brave. You're so much more than I'll ever be, Mel. I don't know how I can make you see that."

"I'm an ugly cripple in a chair," she said.

"No," he said, and he grabbed the chair, whirling her around. He put his hands on her face, then kissed her again, hard. Just as quickly, he drew back, then put his face beside hers, holding her shoulders tightly against him. Again, that intoxicating smell of his cologne and skin, the warm feel of his body. His hands hurt her shoulders, but she didn't struggle.

"You've got to go, Mel. You've got a chance to help everyone. You can't throw it away."

"How can you touch me?" she asked, feeling as though her heart was tearing itself in shreds.

His breath was hot, his voice fierce. "God, it's not what's outside. Look at me. Handsome, right? I'll never be anything. I'm just another working man. I'll live, I'll die, just like everyone else. But you've got it inside," he said, putting his palm against her chest, pressing down, toward her heart.

"John," she said. "John."

"You go on that trip," he said. "Get on the ship. Your body's nothing. Leave it behind."

Tears streamed from Mel's eyes into the visor, pooling around its lower edge. John moved his body, knocking the voiceboard to the patio. Mel heard it clatter, then a blinding colored light shot through the visor. Her body stiffened.

She heard John cry out, realizing dimly that she was on the patio, and she knew what it was — a seizure. She hadn't had one for years. She had thought they were long past.

All she could see was white, not black. Mel's body was jerking, out of control, and something hurt in her mouth, then came a strong, hot taste of copper. She heard footsteps, then Hana, crying for the other nurses.

"My God, I've killed her," John said in a terrible, choked voice.

"No, no, damn it! You dumb kid, it's the implants," came a twangy, American voice. The ISA counselor was there. Mel's arms and legs stopped jerking — the visor flickered in and out. She was off the patio. Somehow, they'd gotten her back in her room. Time passed strangely during seizures, she recalled. Her senses were not to be trusted.

Then, the white changed, became a field of stars. Mel felt suddenly warm and calm, completely in control. It was she, floating, toward a whole group of stars. Above her, a beautiful, pinkish nebula. Below her, blank space. How much more she wanted to go to the nebula than down into the blackness.

How beautiful it was. Complete, ordered, everything in its place. And exciting also, because a star before her, a bare pinpoint of light, was growing brighter and brighter until she thought she could kiss it. She sensed things, felt things she did not know names for; only feelings, instincts, pictures in her mind. It was approaching. Closer and closer until she could see it was a small red thing, nothing like the sun that she'd known as a child, though she'd never seen that from above, nor from such a distance.

Could John see it as well? No, he was not there; she was gone, and so was he. They were very far apart. How easily her body moved, how elegantly, powerfully and simply. She was aware, dimly, of how delicate this body was, but still, so infinitely perfect and beautiful. Like the small red star — the stranger — which she reached out to with her senses of spectral analysis, of direction, and asked it how long it had to live, and how long it had known life. It opened to her like a flower, like the beautiful flower of a hibiscus which her mother had kept outside their house. So red, so perfect, with a bit of a flare like the stamen of the hibiscus flower, and she reached with her senses...and kissed the star.... It was exciting and intoxicating, magic and eternity; mystery and wonder and within it like a seed, the evidence she sought, that yes, it was alive, here there could be life.

Then, someone, a flesh-and-blood person, touched her. Fingers pressing into her, and the star-flower shrank into itself. The warm blackness of space became white.

Faces appeared before her, hovering. Hana, her expression serious.

John, his hand pushing his hair out of his face, eyes wide and frightened. The cowboy ISA counselor. The two technicians, standing behind the others. Someone took her hand. A finger tapped her palm, once.

It was her decision, hers alone. And she knew what John had said was right. Her body really was nothing. And oh...she had kissed the star. She did not know whether the vision had come from inside of her, or it had been something cleverly planted, perhaps something to make her want to go. She realized that she did not care, because she wanted to go now, more than anything else, because this was life — a new kind of life. It had been heaven to kiss John; but to kiss a star?

With all her might, Mel squeezed the finger.

The counselor laughed. "She's game," he said. "She's going."

Mel knew that she couldn't trust her voice, and beneath the visor, they could not see her eyes.

"What? Is she going to be all right?" John looked wildly from face to face, searching for answers. How Mel wished she could say something. She shook her arm, rattling the bracelet. Still, John didn't seem to understand.

"She's going to Epsilon Eridani, son," the counselor said to John. "In about three weeks."

Mel squeezed the counselor's finger again.

"Uh-uh-mmm go-ing," she said, looking up at John's face, relishing the expression of joy as it spread over his face. The words came out so easily. It was like something which had been holding her back had broken away inside when she had flown the heavens. Now her tongue and lips moved as she wished.

John, beautiful John. If she could not be normal, then she could have this other thing. And John had been right — no one else could have it. Only Mel. She didn't need to believe in Jesus, only in what he would do. He would not stay.

"I know what Jesus would do," she said.

John touched her cheek, smiling as he wept, his eyes silently questioning her.

"He would kiss the star," she told him. 

—for Julie M. Jones

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CURIOSITIES

THE BOX FROM JAPAN, BY HARRY STEPHEN KEELER (1932)

HARRY Stephen Keeler's *The Box from Japan* is one of the more unusual sf/mystery novels. Keller wrote the book in 1932 to predict the far-off wonders of 1942. He predicted the Giant Sugar Cactus — a cross between the sugar beet and the saguaro cactus — which became the mainstay of the Mexican economy (their dried flesh makes an inexpensive taco meat). Keeler predicted the second Prohibition, the special Vigesimal Mail election that requires that votes be mailed in on years evenly divisible by the number 22 — which insured blacks having a chance to get the polls in the South — a logical conclusion that I'm sure you all see. He predicted the hologram as the color TV process of 1942. He predicted the creation of laser crystals from sugar. He predicted that personal names

could not be said on the radio in 1942, since they might contain code.

Keeler is not merely a prophet. The intricate, tight plotting of the book defies description. Keeler invented his own plot system called the "web-work plot" which consists of weaving together as many coincidences as possible. *The Box from Japan* is based on approximately 350 coincidences, any one of which would strain the non-Keeler reader's credulity to the breaking point. (Keeping track of the 40+ major characters isn't easy either.) In short there's a L-O-T going on the novel's brief 765 pages. I'll let you in on one secret: that box contains a dye for marking the feet of identical twins, but don't think that will make it easier for you to solve the murder mystery that drives the plot. No one can figure out a Keeler mystery, certainly not Keeler!

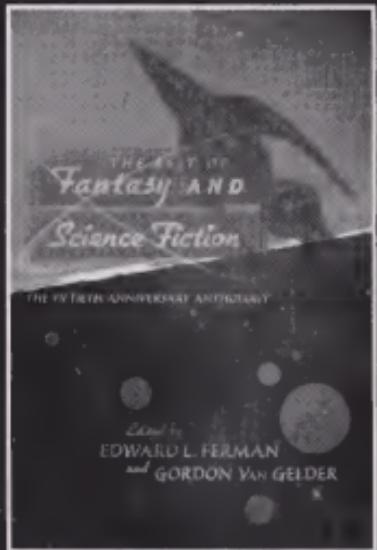
—Don Webb



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